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Powder Puff

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A STORY OF THE MODERN WEST,
WHERE THE AUTOMOBILE HAS SUPPLANTED THE COW
PONY, BUT THE SIX-GUN STILL HOLDS ITS OWN

By Ralph E. Mooney

THOMAS ANDREW CHESTER was at a table near the door of the rose dining room of the new Hyacinth Hotel. He was on the edge of his chair, gathered for a flying start. The weekly luncheon meeting of the Pequenito County Chamber of Commerce was about to break up, and Tom liked to get away at the tap of the gong.

"Be confident," said Judge Pemberton, speaker of the day. "Mental attitude is everything. You can if you think you can. If you think of failure, you can't. Keep in harmony with the great forces of success that fill the universe."

Tom Chester smiled. How much of that did Judge Pemberton actually believe? He didn't look as if he believed any of it. His voice was positive, but his eyes were not. His expression was that of a man who knows he is giving good advice, but who does not necessarily intend to take it.

The judge, who operated an insurance agency, was noted for his part in several

political coups in Pequenito County, and for one or two remarkable decisions handed down during his time on the bench. He was noted for having survived three wives. He was not particularly well known as an exponent of harmony.

"Nobody," Tom murmured, "ever knew he had a mental attitude. This will be a surprise."

Tom enjoyed rebellious thoughts. Where the judge was concerned, he preferred a disrespectful mental attitude to a confident one.

That was because the old egg seemed to be infected with contempt whenever he looked at Tom. Or at any younger man. Well, there was no use getting worked up about it. The judge would never mean anything in Tom's life. Never by any conceivable chance.

"I suppose it's my inferiority complex," Tom acknowledged. "It's the old inferiority complex working."

Of course, Tom knew all about inferi-

ority complexes. He was twenty-four years old, and he knew an amazing lot. That Victorians were all hypocrites, for instance, and that people needed more freedom and less fear to be happy. That worry creates internal poisons, and that all our conventions and beliefs are survivals of primitive taboos.

Finally, he knew that he was a little bit different from any young man of any previous generation. Broader, better, wiser, more in command of himself. Ready for anything, in a sense.

"I am glad to have had the privilege of addressing you to-day," finished Judge Pemberton.

As the handclapping began, Tom cried uprroiously: "You're good, judge, you're good," and next minute was in the hotel lobby with his hat.

Enjoying an internal glow, he watched himself approach a full length mirror near the door. He was merry eyed, dark. Just short of six feet tall, and broad enough to have been a good end at A. and M.

His gray flannel suit was a knockout. Gangway, everybody! San Jacinto, here I come.

He walked down Houston Street a little way and entered a confectionary. Because the proprietor was busy at the soda fountain, he went behind the tobacco case and served himself a can of tobacco. The proprietor, a Greek with pock marks, sauntered across the store.

"Hello, ugly," greeted Tom; "give me change for a quarter, and be quick about it."

The Greek chuckled.

"Who you, tough guy?"

"Tough guy is right," answered Tom. "You said it all then."

"Golly, I gettin' scare'," said the Greek. "Whatsamat?"

"That's all right, whatsamat!"

"All ri-i-eight?" A soft purr. "All right?"

"All right?" mimicked Tom.

On he went, down Houston Street, beaming. Wise cracks and raspberries were great things. They should be passed out liberally. Then everybody had a good time.

A fancy almost caused him to laugh aloud. What would the old-timers think if they could follow his progress and read his inconsequential modern thoughts?

He was on historic ground. San Jacinto

had been a Spanish settlement and an outpost of the Texan Republic, and, later, a United States fort.

Houston Street had once been wide and sandy, and bad men had ridden its length for various purposes, such as shooting out the lamps in the stores or buying a few cans of peaches or something equally trivial. Stage coaches had worn ruts in it, and a Mexican army under Santa Ana had passed the length of it.

Now it was paved with concrete, and a one-man street car passed the Hyacinth Hotel at twenty-minute intervals. At much longer intervals, say once a day, Houston Street might feel the tread of a man who wore boots, might even hear the jingle of spurs, but the intervals were becoming greater.

That fact alone would annoy the old-timers. They most certainly would not appreciate a Texan who wore a gray flannel suit and low shoes, and who did not even keep riding clothes at home; who had not been on a horse since he was twelve, and it only a saddle horse, imported from Kentucky for the use of guests at his uncle's ranch.

II

SOME one waved. Tom squinted. It was Bill Lewis, a classmate at A. and M.

"Well, Lord Almighty, where did you drop from, Bill? I haven't seen you since —when was it?"

"Can't remember. The old man has got a contract in Lufkin, and I've been up there eight months. I'm only in town for the day. What are you doing now, Tom?"

"Me? Oh, you know dad died about two years ago—sure you do; you were out of town and wrote me a letter. Well, he left me a lot of real estate to look after. I'm pretending to look after it. Besides that, I've got one real job on my hands."

"What's that?" Bill provoked. "I'd like to know what you think is a real job?"

"Shut up! Do you remember the old Crow Building? I took hold of it on a foreclosure proceeding. Well, when I got it nearly everybody in it was a crook of some kind; so I moved my office there—no remarks, please—and I've been trying to weed them out and get good tenants and make the place pay."

"Weeding out is easy. About half my crowd disappears every time the grand jury meets, I think. But getting the good

ones is hard. The place has a bad rep, see? The men at the Real Estate Club all say I'm doing uplift work."

"Uplift? That's a good line for you. Stick with it, Tom."

"Come on over to the office. Let's have a party."

Lewis shook his head.

"Not this time. I might be here again in about a month; let's have it then. Say! Anything new? Anybody getting married or anything?"

"Not unless you are?"

"Phooey! How about you?"

"Me?" Tom was uneasy. "Stop joking."

"Now, Tommy!"

"Nothing doing, darn you. Good-by."

"Good-by, useless."

Tom returned to his office in the Crow Building. He made a few unimportant telephone calls, wrote a letter, using the typewriter himself, and read an abstract of title.

Mid-afternoon found him with his feet on his desk, just sitting, doing nothing except to run his fingers along the creases in his trouser legs now and then.

It was spring. The Judas trees had sent up their false flame a month before, in February. Now, the mesquites were turning green and robins were arriving and eating themselves into a ribald and disgraceful coma wherever they could find chinaberries.

Tom had driven through the park that morning to see the bluebonnets, whose exquisite clusters, carpeting every open space, had given him a choking, lonesome thrill. As he smoothed the creases in his trousers, he considered that thrill.

For a long while he had noticed that anything beautiful made him feel lonesome. He might be in a crowd, might even be a member of a large party; nevertheless, he would be lonely.

He was beginning to understand why. He wanted some one to share his pleasure, to share and understand it, some one he could put his arm about, if you get the idea. He was heart hungry, heart hungry and alone. It was sad.

He began to daydream. He saw himself handsome, although he tried to be modest about it, standing just inside the door of a deserted hut.

He saw two burly, sweaty gunmen, black

with such inordinate villainy that they resembled chimney sweeps from St. Louis rather than San Jacintan criminals—in the daydream, of course.

He saw a girl who was their prisoner. She was a girl of medium height, of stanch, healthy figure, blond, with violet eyes and pink cheeks.

She wore a thoughtful expression that somehow indicated depth and character and loyalty. A Saxon kind of girl. She did not seem to mind that she had been captured by two gunmen—in the daydream, you understand.

One gunman had a pistol. The other, providentially, was armed with nothing more potent than a menacing grin. Tom grappled with the grinner, picked him up bodily and threw him at the armed man, and, as both went down, got possession of the pistol.

It would be difficult to say just how he did this, for the action here was hurried, and by no means clear; but, at any rate, the girl was set free.

"How can I ever thank you?" she said.

"Don't thank me," said Tom. "Tell me your name. I couldn't find any one who knew you; so I've been calling you Powder Puff."

As she laughed deliciously—what a keen sense of humor she had!—Tom slipped his arm about her waist and felt lonely no more.

A distant scuffling of feet, not part of the daydream, made Tom look guiltily toward the door. It sounded as if the office boy was coming.

Tom disliked the office boy. He was a freckled little brat, not worth a continental darn, but he would grin in a superior way if he caught Tom dreaming. He might muse for hours himself, but he had no tolerance for others.

Of course, it was wrong to give oneself up to air castle-building. A man should be ashamed to do it. He should take such interest in his work that it could never be possible. It was really a weakness to have such a strong imagination.

Why did he like to indulge it? Tom had to admit that he could not tell.

"All I know is that on warm days I'm apt to do like that," he has since said.

III

THE office boy appeared. He had been away somewhere, stalling, for about half an

hour, but now he acted as if Tom had let everything go to ruin while he was not on hand to superintend.

"Say, Tom," he said, he being very informal, "there's something doing down the hall. You better listen in."

Tom heard somebody talking in a loud, quarrelsome voice. He had been hearing it, he realized, for a long time without just exactly noticing. He rose hastily from his chair.

"I wonder if Dad ever went to sleep with things happening right under his nose? Oh, I guess I don't need to feel too bad about it."

Dad, like most men, could be remembered in two ways, in the office and at home. In the office, he had won the nickname of Dollar Bill Chester, had been keen at the real estate business, and had seen long before the war that their part of Texas was going to boom.

Dollar Bill Chester had drilled Tom in the arts of taking care of real estate and of himself, and had been sarcastic, patient, volcanic, and calm by turns.

Dad, however, had always been delighted to forget business. There had been dreams in Dad's eyes. If not daydreams, recollections that gave his lean Texan face a spiritual quality, as if he saw distant mountains and swirling clouds.

"All right," Tom said to the boy, "you stay here and watch the office."

"All right," said the boy, and he followed Tom down the hall, "it's in room 619."

"Thanks," Tom said, "go back and watch the office. The telephone might ring."

"Yes, sir," answered the boy, tiptoeing along beside Tom. "Say, the guy that's making all the noise is a hard customer. He's got boots on under his pants, and he looks like he came from the two-gun cow country."

Tom stopped and glared, and the boy at last returned to the office. Tom went on toward room 619. The noises of an argument grew ever more unmistakable.

"Now what on earth could be wrong here?" Tom asked himself.

Dr. Jameson X. James was tenant of 619. The doctor, who was a newcomer in the building, had just enough white hair to cover his scalp, keen blue eyes, and a benevolent, even a sanctimonious mouth. He always wore tailor-made suits, and looked

like a financier. He was frank and genial. A nice old boy, Tom said.

A thundering voice arose:

"Do you think I'm a joke? I want to see her."

That was not Dr. James's voice.

Next to room 619 was the office of the Sand Point Land and Irrigation Company. It had been deserted for several weeks, due to the fact that the Sand Point man had been wounded in a dispute with a committee of investors, and was now in the municipal hospital.

Tom used a master key and let himself in. There was a communicating door to 619. The glass panel on it had been painted black, but was scratched in places, and Tom peeped through.

He found Dr. James crouched in a swivel chair beside a desk, plainly nervous. Across the desk, shaking a hairy fist, was the man the office boy had described.

There was nothing plump, pink or fine about this customer. He was old, but well preserved. In fact, he was as hard as nails. His mustache bristled. His eyes were brown and full of fire. His cheeks had been tanned to leather.

Tom knew at once why the office boy said he must be from the cow country. In spite of a ready-made suit, reddish brown in color and cut for the business man, the mark of old Texas was on him as plain as a brand on a sorrel pony. He didn't need his two-gallon hat and bandanna to classify himself.

The partition was flimsy, and Tom was able to hear what was said. Dr. James spoke first:

"Really, I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Steel. I have introduced you to the young lady by mail, and if, as you say, she has rejected you, I can't help it. Your—ahem—your contract and fee of ten dollars called only for an introduction by mail. I never have personal dealings with my clients."

Mr. Steel, of old Texas, became sarcastic.

"You never have personal dealings, hey? Well, this is *one* you're having. You think I'm a joke, hey? You introduced me to a girl who was to be addressed in care of this office, and there's no girl here. I don't believe there is such a girl. Do you know what I think?"

Dr. James seemed to try to concentrate on the answer to this question, although he

could not have been in much doubt as to what Steel thought.

"I don't know—" he began.

"I'll tell you," shouted Steel. "I think you're a crook."

"Oh, now," consoled Dr. James, "you are excited, Mr. Steel. The thing to do is to be calm. If you will—"

"Your matrimonial agency is a plain fake."

As Tom got the meaning of this, he winced and made a grimace. It was a sort of joke, but a poor one, to find that a tenant he had rated as most desirable was as black a bird as any other that had flocked to the Crow Building. A matrimonial agency? Good glory, what next?

Steel went on talking at high speed. It was fascinating to watch the play on the Texan's lips. They were thin and seemed to snap together and cut off his pronouncements, word by word.

"You've put it over me or you think you're going to put it over, but you're not. If you don't make good and let me talk to that girl, I'm going to knock more than ten dollars' worth out of you."

For emphasis, he let fly a swing of his fist. Dr. James frantically jumped out of his chair, and Tom put a key in the door, at the point of interfering. Just for an instant it looked like murder.

IV

"MR. STEEL," cried the doctor, "if you don't leave here, I shall have to call a policeman."

Steel showed his teeth.

"No, you won't," he said. "I'm a policeman."

Dr. James shriveled and became pale.

"I'm a prohibition enforcement officer." Steel flashed his badge. "I used to be a ranger. Did you ever hear of the Texas rangers? They put me on this work when they broke up our force, so I'm still in the pay of the State; so if you need an officer, why, here I am. What did you want, mister? Was somebody annoyin' you?"

Dr. James almost sobbed, and Steel laughed.

"Now listen, doc, I'm not here on business unless you force me to it. The truth is, I can treat you pretty nice if I want to.

"But don't take me for a sucker. I was a lonesome man, and I thought when I answered your ad that it was probably a fake. Well, I says, if it is, why I can handle him

all right. If it isn't, why all right again, I might get me a wife.

"Then you sent me her photograph, and I didn't take more than two looks before I says to myself, 'I'm going to have that girl, or die trying.'"

"Oh, my soul!" cried Dr. James.

"How's that?"

"Nothing, nothing. You surprise me, that's all."

"That's all?" Steel began to tremble. "That's all, after I've told you what I have?"

"But, Mr. Steel—" said James feebly.

"Listen here, I've fooled with you long enough. You can't understand the rangers. We work fast and quick. Now, I'm going to tell you just what I came here for. I'll tell you just where you stand with me. Just exactly. You're either honest, or you're half honest, or you're a crook. That's the thing in two words."

"Oh, I'm honest, believe me."

"Well, old rooster, if you're honest, then there actually is a lady named Isabel Canfield, and that's her picture you sent me, and you can tell me where to find her."

"If you're only half honest, you've got some woman helping you that makes a business of rejecting lonesome men like me, and you can tell me where this woman is."

"If you're dishonest, you're here alone and you can't tell me where to find anybody. Isn't that right?"

"Y-yes, sir," mumbled the doctor.

"In two words," said Steel, "there either is such a girl or there isn't. If there is, and you won't tell me where to see her—well, I'm no joke, that's all."

"If there isn't, you're going to get to see one of the best of the old-time rangers in action. How's that?"

Dr. James scratched his head. Tom noticed that the doctor's scalp was very pink, and his fingers very white.

"That—that's all right."

Steel swelled out his chest.

"Well?"

The doctor looked to all sides desperately.

"I—I think I could bring her here if you'd give me a little time."

"Time? Why? Where is she?"

"She's here in town," the doctor admitted.

Steel smiled.

"You just take that phone and call her right away."

"No, no," said the doctor, "you mustn't stay here. You must go away for a few minutes. You must give me time."

The old ranger pretended to laugh.

"Ha! Ha! I won't let you out of my sight, and if you don't hurry up, I'll prod you some."

"Mr. Steel," advised the doctor, "you can't do things this way. You must let me talk to her awhile and arrange matters. You can't surprise a girl like this. She wouldn't like it if you met her when she wasn't ready to see you. She—why, she'd be mad. You don't understand about women."

Steel frowned. This, apparently, was a point he hadn't considered. It made him uneasy. Tom was amused to see that the man who had been threatening assault and battery had been made mild by a few words. It was funny, too, how skillfully the doctor pressed his advantage.

"Why, my friend," he said, "a girl is furious if a man comes upon her without letting her get ready. You know—she likes to powder and things like that."

"You trust me and just go downstairs for half an hour and wait. Let me call her here and explain. Then I'll bring you up."

"Now, believe me, I won't try to hinder you. I'm just as interested in making a match for you as you are yourself."

"I am a marriage broker, known all over the world for my success in bringing the right people together. I'm not—ha! ha!—a divorce lawyer. Nor—ha! ha!—a chap-eron or censor. No, indeed."

"Maybe you're right, but I think you're up to something." Steel scowled at Dr. James for some time, but finally went to the door. "I'll give you your half hour, but I know I'm a fool to do it. Well, then, if you feel like scooting out, just remember I've trailed down leaner and tougher mavericks than you in my time."

"I have given you my word, Mr. Steel," said Dr. James, and somehow he made both his hearers disregard better judgment and feel that his word was valuable. "I shall not attempt to leave the building."

"Is that so?" countered Steel. "I'll wait in the lobby and make sure you don't. And like enough I'll call police headquarters and tell them a few things about you." He stepped outside, his eyes glowing. "Keep your mind on your business now."

"Yes, indeed," bowed Dr. James. "Good-by."

"Good-by *hell!* I'll see you again in half an hour. Maybe less."

V

THIS, Tom said to himself contentedly, was what might be called a queer experience, one of those things that make a person realize he positively can't tell what will happen next.

A short time ago he had been pinching the crease in his trouser leg, completely idle. Now he was at a peephole in a partition door. What a terrific amount of kidding he would be in for if somebody from the Real Estate Club should discover him.

About him were sheaves of grain and jars of preserved citrus fruits, properties of the Sand Point office. Beyond the peephole was a literary region inhabited by Dr. James.

There were shelves in the doctor's office, all piled with pamphlets. There were packages of printed matter on the floor, each with a proof of its contents neatly pasted on the top.

Dr. James, left alone, stood motionless, wearing a look of spiritual resignation. "Though they persecute me forever," his expression said, "my faith will remain unshaken."

"What is he going to do?" puzzled Tom. "What was he planning when he wanted to be left alone? I've got to stay and see this through."

Steel went down the corridor, his boots clumping upon the floor. Then the hydraulic elevator wheezed up to the sixth floor, received a passenger and went down, making the whole building shake as it vibrated in its shaft. Dr. James hurried to the door, made sure the ranger was out of the way, and then took up his telephone and gave a number.

"Isabel?" he said in a new tone, matter-of-fact and affectionate. "I'm not feeling well. I've decided to drive down to Galveston for a few days. Pack your suitcase right away. Well, yes, it is sudden, but I've made up my mind. We'll leave as soon as I get home. Wonderful weather for a little trip. Good-by."

Dr. James set the telephone down and put on his hat. Without hesitating, he went to the north window of his office and began to climb onto the sill. Tom gasped as he received full enlightenment.

Seven feet below that window was the roof of the Gilfillan Building, and in the

center of it was a trapdoor that was always open in warm weather.

Obviously, another tenant of the Crow Building was about to vacate without notice. His rent was a month overdue, too. Tom opened the partition door.

"Just wait a minute, please," he said.

Dr. James scrambled down off the window sill, pink and cringing. There was a desperate light in his eyes.

"Well, what is it?"

"I've been listening to the conversation."

Tom's voice was husky and embarrassed, for he didn't know exactly how to deal with such an outright fraud.

"Do you mean you heard the fellow that pretends he is an officer?" the doctor asked. "It isn't possible you can't see that he is nothing more or less than a blackmailer after my honest money?"

This was childish, of course.

"I don't know about that," Tom answered. "I only thought I'd better see you before you tried to drop through that trap on the next roof. There's something you've forgotten."

Dr. James ignored the hint about his rent, but turned to the window and stared at the trapdoor.

"Drop through?" he argued. "There is a ladder—"

"Was, but not is," Tom said. "Some painters borrowed it this morning. I sent them over."

The doctor suddenly began to perspire. He wiped his forehead.

"Oh, my soul! Well, what do you want? Call the detective if you have to."

"I'm not connected with him. I just want to remind you about your rent before you go."

"Oh!" Dr. James had only contempt for such pettiness, but began to write a check.

"In cash, please."

The doctor glared at Tom, and reluctantly produced the money.

"Do you intend to leave for good?" Tom asked.

Dr. James looked from the window to the door.

"Leave? I can't drop through the trap, and you know it. I can't go downstairs." Suddenly he held out his hands to Tom.

"Boy, I've got to get away."

"Well, I won't bother you," said Tom. "All I wanted was your rent."

"Can't you help me?" Dr. James begged. "This is serious, not only to me but to somebody else."

Tom shook his head, although he was moved. You may be completely disgusted with a man, but when he throws himself on your mercy you must give him consideration. A lot of people with set ideas don't know that.

In fact, Tom didn't know it then; so he found himself getting rather mixed up. He had laughed to see Steel swayed by the doctor's plausibilities, but here he was beginning to swallow them himself.

"Young fellow, I know you've got no sympathy for me, but you're wrong. You think I tried to cheat that ranger fellow, but I didn't. He cheated himself. He answered an advertisement that he knew promised an impossible thing."

"But you printed the advertisement."

Dr. James smiled sorrowfully.

"Well, I can't furnish references. The Y. M. C. A. doesn't know me at all. Nobody else does. In a way, I'm an outcast. I've had a hard life."

It was most embarrassing.

"I don't know what I could do," Tom said.

The doctor's tone became more distressed.

"I'm not talking for myself; it's for my daughter."

"Your daughter?" This must be hokum; Tom would not believe it.

"Yes, look here."

VI

DR. JAMES took a photograph from a drawer of his desk and gave it over. When Tom saw it, he felt a great disturbance inside. His heart seemed to stop, his stomach to turn over, as if something had suddenly hurt him.

"Is she your daughter?" he cried.

"Have you seen her?"

"Yes."

Nothing to equal this could ever have happened before in all history, Tom was sure. For the photograph was of a girl of medium height, of stanch, healthy figure, with blond hair, violet eyes, and pink cheeks.

She wore an expression that somehow indicated depth and character and loyalty. A Saxon girl. He had seen her five times, not counting the first time he met her, if that encounter could be called a meeting.

Tom never had been, at any time in his life, a fuzzer. He rarely paid attention to women at all except to take them to dances or to picture shows. He was not susceptible or flirty, he knew, but was actually blasé and indifferent.

Yet upon an afternoon about two weeks ago he had gone into a news-stand on Houston Street to buy an evening paper. He had begun to read inside and had walked out on the street, still reading.

Suddenly the paper crashed and crumpled. He had run into some one. It was this girl. Bang! That's the way things happen in life.

He looked into her eyes, and he had the feeling that she could see back behind his forehead and read secrets there. The whole world seemed to fall away and they seemed to stand together upon some high place. It was only for a moment.

Then a passer-by jostled him, and he lifted his hat, and she nodded and went and got into a little four-cylinder car that was standing at the curb.

She left him knocked for a loop. He trembled and had chilly sensations. He began wishing he might see her again.

He had seen her again, in the most tantalizing way, catching glimpses of her here and there. It was like being haunted, only worse. Once she had appeared on a street corner, half a block away, and was gone before he reached the spot.

Another time he was quite startled to find her walking along the sidewalk a few feet in front of him. She turned into a beauty shop before he managed to pull himself together.

Again, he suddenly found her looking at him from under an umbrella, during a shower. He met her walking out of the Crow Building one morning, and an hour or so later, while looking down from his office window, he saw her cross Houston Street.

Although he was not a ladies' man and never had been, he tried to find out who she was. But, bless your soul, nobody in San Jacinto seemed to know. Several had seen her; none knew her name. Few cared whether they knew it or not.

So Tom had begun to build daydreams about her. He had wandered about San Jacinto rescuing her from gunmen and pulling her back from in front of automobiles.

He had even looked forward to a terrible day, fifty years in the future, when an old

woman and an old man would meet and see in each other the mate of whom each had been cheated through all the years.

"Why didn't you speak?" the old woman would quaver. "I always hoped you would."

"I didn't dare," the old man would respond. "I didn't even know your name."

For although Tom knew that religions were superstition and conventions a set of taboos, he couldn't feel free to step up and introduce himself. Something that wasn't superstition and wasn't taboo held him back. A natural, if puzzling, diffidence.

Nature, of course, has never written an outline of her activities. She doesn't bother to explain certain lamentable conflicts with theory that she authorizes and effects.

"All I had for you," the old man would explain, "was a foolish nickname that I gave you one day. I called you Powder Puff."

The nickname had taken his fancy so that he had breathed it thirty or forty times a day. Powder Puff. Little Powder Puff. It was as unreasonable as most nicknames.

The girl was blond, but she did not resemble a powder puff as tiny blond girls do. No, she was Saxon, hinting more of outdoors than of the boudoir. Thoughtful and loyal, not frippery.

Perhaps it was because she was a purely feminine type, and Powder Puff, in a way, summed up all things purely feminine.

At any rate, Tom called her Powder Puff, and here was her photograph. He could feel the power of her eyes as he studied it. She was Dr. James's daughter. Of all things! This was her father, weak and shifty, with beads of sweat on his forehead. Tom shuddered.

"Her name is Isabel," said Dr. James, with some haste. "She's my daughter, on the level. I adopted her in the probate court in St. Louis nineteen years ago. Her mother was a fine woman."

"I can't go into history, young fellow, but I'll tell you that I was mighty fond of her mother. She was a widow with this one child, and she and I were thinking of getting married some day, but she died."

"They were living at a boarding house where I was staying. This girl was left alone in the world, just a baby you might say, so I took her in charge and gave her my name. Whatever else they can say of me, that was one case where I did right."

"And I've taken care of her. First, I put her in charge of a nice family I knew, and then I sent her to school and to college. She thought I was her real father for a long time, and I've made the finest little lady of her you ever saw. I ain't spared a cent.

"She don't know anything about me. Her mother didn't either. They thought I had a large invested estate. Isabel still does.

"Well, she's twenty-two now, and I brought her here intending to settle down and be square the rest of my life."

Tom felt nervous.

"I suppose that was impossible," he scolded.

"What was?" the doctor asked.

"To be square the rest of your life."

To the doctor this was plainly a matter of no great moment. He took a forgiving tone.

"Oh, well, I meant to be anyhow. Why not? I had enough to live on. But smart as I am, a fellow in New York was smarter. He sprung the All-American Investment Company, and before long I was a retired financier without any finances.

"And the girl wanted a car. I got it. I couldn't ever say 'No' to her. Can't now. I put over a few small deals at that time, and then this idea of a matrimonial agency came to me. I had always done well with it before.

"There's always people wanting help to get married. I don't know why. Anyhow, now I'm in this mess and I've dragged her into it like a fool. Oh, what a fool!"

"What?" Tom protested. "You've got this girl mixed up in it? How?"

The doctor groaned and wouldn't meet Tom's eye. At last he seemed to be really ashamed.

"It's awful—but I never dreamed anything like this would happen. It wasn't because I didn't think it over or because I didn't care for her.

"You see, I needed photographs. I had a few dozen ordinary ones, but I got to thinking I could use hers for the best answers to my ads. The real eggs, you understand. She's the prettiest girl I know, and I couldn't see how she'd ever find out."

"You mean you let people think she was one of the women who wanted to marry? Why, you're a dirty old scoundrel!"

"Well, yes," Dr. James admitted. "Anyhow the other photographs didn't cause any sensation, but hers has kept about twenty men repeating—sending through letters at five dollars charge by the bureau—but now that detective wants to court her.

"If I don't let him do it, he's apt to try to send her to jail as my accomplice, and what chance has she got to prove she is innocent when he can show that I sent him her picture? Nobody will believe anything she says. By Heaven, Mr. Chester, she is innocent, and I don't want her humiliated."

"Good glory!"

"Oh, well, don't worry about that. Don't think I am going to let her get caught or that I wouldn't give myself up to save her. If you will help me, though, I think I can get her away where he'll never see her.

"If I do, by thunder, I promise you and I promise myself that I'll never try for easy money again. I'll get some regular job. What do you say, boy? Will you give me a lift? Think of some way to get me out."

Tom was unable to speak for a moment because sudden understanding of a great moral truth had come to him. Until then he had assumed that doing right or wrong was a matter of personal choice and that criticism of such things was priggish, but here was a case where a man's personal choice was apt to put an innocent girl in prison.

No, criticism could be too harsh. It was stunning to realize that life might be full of such demonstrations as this, and that eventually all of a person's opinions might be upset.

He was moved to give the doctor a short and fiery lecture, but he realized that time was flying, and that old-timer Steel might come upstairs again at any minute.

Well, although the doctor deserved no mercy, the innocent girl should be protected. Certainly there were no two ways about that.

Tom got out his key ring.

"I'll do it for her sake," he said. "If it was only you, I wouldn't bother. Here is the key to the freight elevator. It will take you down to the alley instead of the lobby.

"Go around the hall to the right as far as you can, and you'll find it. Just press the button, and don't open the door until you hear the machinery stop."

"Good-by," the doctor said, taking the key. "You're doing an awful square thing, youngster. You'll never regret it."

He left the room at a run.

VII

"So I've done a square thing, and I'll never regret it," was Tom's sarcastic thought. "Ha! He would say anything was square if it helped him, and he hasn't an idea of what regret means."

Tom wandered about the office, frowning. He was in a muddle. He had a vague desire to meet the doctor's daughter and talk to her. He had also disgust for the whole affair. His daydreams had been a good deal of fun, and now they were shattered.

Powder Puff was no longer Powder Puff. She was Isabel James, a girl in sordid and unromantic circumstances.

He had helped the doctor so that she could be taken away. Probably he would never see her again. It was sad. More than that, it was downright tough.

He took up a pamphlet from a shelf and found that it described the service rendered by the Star Matrimonial Bureau which had just come to grief. There were photographs and descriptions of various people who sought to marry. Also a few paragraphs of advice on courtship. Dr. James had his name set down on the last page as president and chief adviser.

Tom laughed as he read the titles and recalled the owner of them cringing before Officer Steel.

There were two other booklets, one called "A Thousand Valuable Secrets for the Farmer," and the other, "How To Keep a Beautiful Figure." These were intended to sell by mail at twenty-five cents each. They were cheaply printed and looked depressing.

He tossed them away and went to a window that gave upon the alley and watched for Dr. James. The old man emerged from the building and trotted toward the street. He looked up and waved good-by.

Tom did not return the signal. Fate had decreed that the girl he knew as Powder Puff must go through the best years of her life tied to that flabby old creature. Probably she would be with him, dodging from city to city, until he died.

Tom found his hands trembling. He looked at them, and shook his head mournfully.

The door latch clicked. Tom turned from the window with a gasp of dismay. He should not have stayed so long in the office, he realized. Steel had promised to return, and Tom wanted no dealings with that old boy. He would be a risky proposition under the most favorable circumstances.

But it wasn't Steel. As Tom struggled to get command of himself, he saw a flash of color, a delicate dress, blond hair, violet eyes—surprised eyes, with a faint hint of pleasure in them, if he could rightly judge. Powder Puff. Isabel.

"Daddy," she cried, "I drove down after you. I wanted my new hat so—"

She stopped, mutely demanding an explanation of Tom's presence. It was an agonizing moment.

"I beg pardon," she said with a smile. "I'm looking for my father."

"He isn't here." Tom's tongue was thick as a drunkard's. "He just left."

There she was before him, her manner letting him know that she might be willing to accept this casual meeting as an introduction, that she would not mind talking with him for a short time, and that she was aware he wanted to talk with her.

There she was, neither too modest nor too flirtatious, just agreeable and unafraid. Downstairs was Steel, who wanted to court her and who believed her to be an accomplice of the doctor's.

Suppose Steel came up and found her? What would happen? The old fellow would pounce upon her like a tiger. He would imagine she knew all about his matrimonial intentions and would begin his courting offhand.

If she protested he would roar and shake his hairy fists. He would threaten her with jail.

Tom's brain was flooded with things he wanted to say that would help to get acquainted, but he knew he must forget them. Isabel must be warned and sent away.

He made ready to speak, but caught himself. Warned? How? She believed Dr. James was a retired financier. How could any one explain that he wasn't in a few minutes' time? She would not believe it.

"I think he's gone home," was what Tom mumbled. "I don't think he'll be back."

She stared, disapproving his manner.

"Oh, very well," she said, and turned toward the door.

It was like a nightmare.

"No, no, you mustn't go back downstairs. You must— How did you get in here anyhow? Didn't anybody try to stop you?"

"I came through the millinery shop to the elevator—but what makes you ask that? Why shouldn't I come here? Who would try to stop me?"

"Well," said Tom, "well—"

He got no further. Isabel stared a moment, then moved toward the door uneasily. He held out his hand, motioning her back. And, from down the hall, came the clang of the elevator gate and the rumble of Steel's voice.

Tom made no conscious decision as to what to do, but acted on impulse. Impulse, he discovered, takes control of a person at such times. While he was still wondering what course to follow he found himself running across the office and opening the door of the quarters of the Sand Point Irrigation Company.

"Quick," he whispered, "go in here."

Isabel retreated toward the hall, her eyes glinting with fear. In desperation, he sprang to her side, caught her arm, and hustled her firmly toward the partition door.

"You've got to," he said. "There's a man coming who hates the doctor, and the doctor doesn't want him to meet you."

She held back at the point of screaming.

"Necessary," he said, "and listen: as soon as you hear this man talking to me, go through that other door to the hall and hurry home. The doctor will be waiting for you. Tell him what has happened and he will explain everything. Good-by!"

She made a faint sound of protest, but Tom could risk no more delay. He closed the door, and with the vision still before his eyes of her exquisite figure standing out against a background of dingy furniture and samples of Sand Point produce, he tried to prepare himself for the ordeal he knew was coming.

VIII

THE old ranger came down the hall. Outside the door he cleared his throat, making a loud grunting noise. He thrust his broad shoulders and tanned face into the office with calm inquiry, but when he saw Tom his face darkened.

"Who are you?" he growled. "Where's Dr. James?"

Tom suddenly realized that now he was almost in the same situation the doctor had been in, and wanted to laugh at the idea. Ordinarily, he was proud of his sense of humor, but he checked the desire hastily.

"I'm manager of this building," he said, trying to be surprised. "I was looking for James myself."

Steel made a gesture of exasperation. Tom became cool. A sort of genius seemed to prompt him for the moment, and to commend his work.

"Are you a friend of his?" he asked.

Steel turned purple.

"Friend? I'm just enough of a friend to send him to jail. I'm an officer. Where has he gone? How did he get out of here?"

Tom shook his head.

"There was some trouble in here a little while ago. I came to see about it, but I found the place empty."

Not a flat lie at any rate, just a twisting of the truth. Tom heard the outer door of the Sand Point office close faintly, and knew Isabel was leaving. If Steel heard the noise he paid no attention.

"Empty, hey?" he said. "Well, I thought so. I'm the man that made the trouble, my boy, and I'll make more. Do you know what that old skunk did? He promised to bring somebody here that I wanted to see. Now he's scattered. But I'll find him." Steel went toward the door vindictively. "I'll ransack this city till I find him."

Tom saw delay was necessary. Isabel had not had time to leave the building. Indeed, she was probably still in the hall.

"By thunder!" he cried.

"What is it?"

Tom pointed to the Gilfillan roof.

"That trapdoor," he said. "That's how James did it."

Steel rushed to the window, as Tom had hoped. He did more. He drew a large revolver as if its use was second nature to him. Then, after glaring at the opening a moment, he scrambled over the sill, dropped to the Gilfillan roof and made an investigation, calling back now and then.

"There ain't any ladder, and it's a twelve-foot fall. How could he do it? Oh, I suppose he took the ladder down, damn him."

"Damn it," echoed Tom, "I wanted his rent."

"Ha! Ha!" Steel derided. "You'll wait

a long time for your rent." Abandoning the trapdoor, he came back to the window.
" Give me your hand."

Tom reached down as far as he could, and the old fellow caught hold, coming up with easy agility.

" That bird is a crook," he growled, dusting his trousers in a careless way, " and I'm going to get him or die. I'm an officer. I used to be a ranger. We always would get 'em sooner or later, and I've got particular reasons to get him."

He stopped for a moment and looked Tom over with a wide, yellow-toothed grin.
" You from Texas?" he asked.

" Born here," Tom said.

" My first name is Enright," Steel volunteered. " I'm from out around El Paso. Do you know anybody there?"

" I don't, but my father did. He was Bill Chester. Dollar Bill Chester."

" Oh, sure. I heard of him. Is your name Bill? Oh, Tom. Well, so long, Tom. When I get through with this doctor I'll try and remember to see about your rent."

Enright Steel gave a hearty grip, and Tom felt ashamed. He was on the wrong side of the fence, he realized. He was helping a sneak to outwit a fellow Texan. Steel might be rough, but he was nine times a better man than the doctor.

" You know," the old ranger said, stopping near the door, " I reckon I'm just a crazy old coot. You'd never guess what I came here for. Well, it was a girl. That's a fact.

" This doctor was running one of them matrimonial agencies. He advertised her. Now, I live all alone in a little hotel, and somehow, sitting up in my room, I got to thinking I might get to see her. There's no fool like an old fool, is there? I'll bet there never was such a girl."

This made Tom miserable.

" Maybe not," he said weakly.

" Of course there wasn't. Well, so long—"

Steel had one hand on the doorknob. In a moment now Tom could wash his hands of the whole affair. He had played a low part, but at least he had helped Isabel. That was enough to do. He would be well out of it.

Suddenly the door was pushed open. It crashed against Steel, who drew back with an exclamation. A large woman in black silk confronted them.

" Which of you is Dr. James?" she asked.

Her voice made Tom think of reformers, school principals, and elocutionists, of all the authoritative women he had ever met.

" He's gone," said the young man hastily.

" I'm looking for him, too," added Steel.

" Well, just a minute, you two," she ordered. " I'm going to get some satisfaction here or know the reason why. Are either of you connected with Dr. James?"

She had a big, hard face. As she talked, thin lines came upon it from the base of her nose, curving down past her lips. Tom knew what they meant, for he had seen them upon the faces of men who were driving for the last inch of advantage in a real estate deal.

She was otherwise unpleasant. Her head was round and big. From her shoulders to her waist she was rotund and again below the waist, so that she was like three oddly shaped bundles placed on top of each other. Tom was thankful that he was not connected with Dr. James, and he hurried to tell her so.

" No, ma'am; my name is Chester, and I'm manager of this building."

" Chester!" she exclaimed. " Well, you'll do. I want my money back."

She fixed her eyes upon Tom, and he shuddered in spite of himself.

" What do you mean?" he asked, for he had no idea what she was talking about.

Steel took a step forward.

" What is it, madam?" he asked. " My name is Enright Steel, and I'm a detective. What's happened?"

Now both eyed Tom with suspicion, and panic began to grip him.

" My name is Curlow," said the woman. " Mrs. Myra Curlow, of Fort Worth. I'm a widow. I bought a small interest in this building from Dr. James. I just found out it was a trick."

" He had no right to sell, and the building is no good anyhow. Your name, young man, was on his letters. I want that money back."

" But I didn't have anything to do with it," Tom managed to say.

She set her chin grimly.

" Here's one of the letters. Your name's on it plain enough."

She opened a black bag which hung on her arm and took out a sheet of the stationery of the Crow Building Company; Thomas A. Chester, manager. It was one of Tom's own letterheads.

Upon it was a typed message addressed to Mrs. Curlow, which offered to sell four shares of the building company's stock for two thousand dollars, and which was signed by Jameson X. James. The doctor had gayly taken the title of "Manager, Securities Department."

The letterhead must have been borrowed or stolen from the building office. Tom's head began to swim. This wasn't petty swindling; it was big-league stuff.

How many more letters had James written? How much trouble was brewing because of them? And Tom had helped the confounded old scalawag to get away, believing him just a nickel-snatcher.

Steel took the letter.

"Yes, it's plain enough," he said.

Tom tried to explain.

"But I didn't write it. I mean he had no authority to. The building is incorporated, you see, but I own all the stock. I'm the owner. He couldn't—"

"Young fellow," said Steel, gritting his teeth, "you were here just after the doc left, and you been stalling me and delaying me, and now you pretend you're not in with him, although this letter is staring you in the face. You're no Texan; you're a dirty Eastern dude, that's what you are, and you're going to jail."

IX

TOM CHESTER was aware that he was in a mean situation, but Steel's threat of jail did not frighten him. Jail was just a word in Tom's vocabulary; it was not a fact in his life.

Once in awhile, of course, he had seen a low, Spanish type building which he knew was jail and police headquarters combined, but he had paid no attention to it except to make facetious remarks.

He knew that a great many people went to jail or police headquarters, but he was decidedly hazy as to how they found the way there.

So he calmly attempted to set himself right with Officer Steel and Mrs. Curlow. To his immense surprise, he found there was no way to set himself right.

He took them down the hall to his office and explained and explained until he grew tired of the sound of his own voice, and still they shook the stolen letterhead in his face and clamored accusations; while the freckled office boy, round-eyed and pallid, hung about the edges of the controversy.

At last, incredibly, Tom found himself in the elevator, wearing his hat, and on the way to police headquarters, perfectly sane, perfectly sober, yet doing an impossible thing.

The hydraulic machinery made ghastly sobs and death rattles. The interior of the elevator car took on a changed appearance. For that matter, everything looked different, as if he was in a strange building in a strange city.

What was there to do? Nothing. It was foolish to resist an officer. And Steel was an officer who insisted upon this crazy expedition.

As they emerged upon Houston Street, Steel clutched Tom's arm. A bystander turned his head with a curious air, and there came the realization that San Jacinto was full of friends and acquaintances. That it had newspapers. That Tom Chester, a fellow who was known for doing uplift work in the Crow Building, was in a mess that would make choice gossip if it ever became known.

"We might as well go in my car," he said anxiously. "It's a long walk."

"Where is your car?" asked Steel.

Happily it was parked quite near, and Tom was able to scramble into it and take his place at the wheel before any one who knew him came in sight.

Steel sat beside him, and Mrs. Curlow settled upon the rear seat, talking steadily and vindictively.

Turning into the traffic, Tom was still bothered with the feeling that the world had changed. It had become cold and impersonal. Hitherto, its coldness had been only a figure of speech, but now Tom breathed: "By thunder, it is. Why, the whole darn business goes on just the same, no matter what happens to you!"

"Remember you're under arrest," Steel warned. "I'm an officer."

"Remember!" gasped Tom. He wanted to laugh, but the desire was very feeble indeed.

"Probably you bought this fine automobile with my money," said Mrs. Curlow in a hard tone.

Tom ignored her. There was no use trying to talk to Mrs. Curlow, he had found. Every word provoked worse insinuations, and more bitter language.

She was not quiet long.

"I won't prosecute if you'll pay it back. I don't want to be vengeful; I'm just a

poor woman that must protect her property."

They came to police headquarters, and a hawk-eyed man in plain clothes, whom Tom had never seen before, but who seemed to take a careful mental photograph of him, sent them to the second floor.

They climbed a metal stairway with dusty footprints on it. Just ahead of them a huge negress waddled, clinging to the arm of a uniformed officer, and weeping copious, giddy tears.

They were directed to a row of kitchen chairs in the anteroom to the office of the chief of police, and the chair next Tom's was occupied by a distraught and nervous Chinese in handcuffs.

"Phew!" sighed the young man. "I'm not missing a thing."

He tried to imagine what would happen next, but he couldn't read that far into the future. He still could not quite believe that anything was happening at all, although he had a horrid feeling of helplessness.

Now and again he would recall that scarcely an hour before he had been sitting in his office, dreaming; believing himself alert and care-free, ready for anything.

At last came a welcome surprise. They were ushered into the chief's office. The chief, a plump man, with only the lower third of his hair left to garnish his shiny scalp, looked up with a quizzical smile.

"Hello, Tom!" he said. "What can I do for you?"

That was sweet. It was like getting news that A. and M. had kicked a field goal in the last three minutes of play.

Tom knew nothing of police headquarters, and had overlooked the fact that headquarters might know something of him. The chief, although bald and middle-aged, was Emory Galvin.

Tom had known Emory when he had hair like an Indian and shoulders like a blacksmith, and was exactly one-fourth of the San Jacinto police force. At one stage of growth, indeed, Tom had spent every evening patrolling the town with Emory and exchanging confidences.

He had been punished for staying out until midnight, but had begged to be allowed, just once, to walk with Emory through an entire trick, from six at night till six in the morning.

Galvin shook hands with Tom, gave him

the best chair in the office, and then listened to Steel and Mrs. Curlow. When they finished, he laughed.

"All right, folks, I'll get after this Dr. James for you, but I won't do anything to Tom here. Why, I helped raise this boy, and I know he wouldn't be mixed up in anything the doctor was doing."

"I won't prosecute if he'll pay back my two thousand dollars," said Mrs. Curlow.

"Lady, you won't prosecute anyway," returned Emory Galvin stoutly, "because I'm not going to be fool enough to ask for a warrant against him. He's all right, I tell you. His word is as good as yours."

Mrs. Curlow wept.

"I'm just a poor woman, and I must protect my property," she said.

"I'll help you do that, but we won't bother Tom any more. You run on, Tom. You've told me all you know about it, haven't you? Sure, run on, then, and drop in and see a fellow once in a while."

"You bet I will, Emory," said Tom gratefully.

As he went out both Mrs. Curlow and Steel looked as though they would like to clutch at him and hold him back. He kept carefully out of clutching distance.

X

As soon as possible, Tom got into his car and pointed for home. He was nervous. Whenever he saw a blue coat and brass buttons he felt guilty. Something might go wrong and he might be taken back to headquarters.

It was on his conscience that he had traded a little on Emory Galvin's friendship. He hadn't mentioned the freight elevator key or the girl, but had held to his story of going to investigate trouble and coming upon an empty office.

They might find out about that key. Would Emory understand how he came to give it to the doctor?

Tom was living with his aunt and cousin. His aunt was Mrs. Clara Westcott, the cousin's name was Bob. Aunt Clara's house was a story-and-a-half bungalow, four rooms downstairs and four up, with a porch across the front.

Tom put his car in the garage at the back end of the lot, and was thankful, when he went into the kitchen, to find nobody on hand but the cook. He was first one home that afternoon.

In less than two minutes he was in his

room, with the door shut, stretched out in his easy chair. It was fine to see his books and his ash trays and his correspondence course in accounting all scattered around him. It helped him to realize that the world hadn't turned upside down after all.

No, he had merely had an experience. Everybody had experiences, and sometimes they were unpleasant ones that left scars upon the memory.

Now, he could see that the danger was over, and that he had been foolish to worry about the freight elevator key. It didn't matter whether he had helped the doctor or not. Emory Galvin knew he was no swindler. That was what counted.

It was a relief to get this far, but there was still a great deal to think about. It was hard to believe that Isabel wasn't in on the doctor's schemes after all.

Dr. James had said she wasn't, but the doctor was an awful liar, and, opposed to what he said, was the fact that she lived with him as a daughter and might easily be his accomplice.

As Tom understood it, crime was a disease, or the result of a disease. The doctor was probably epileptic and absolutely untrustworthy.

Therefore, you couldn't be sure of Isabel; she might be a natural daughter with tainted blood. They came from the East or North, where anything was possible.

Tom knew he was sophisticated. He had been told so often that his generation was unusually sophisticated that he had grown proud of it. His generation seemed to be distinguished, in a way.

Nevertheless, he shuddered now. He was willing to be sophisticated in theory, but not in fact. Not in the face of such facts as whirled inside his head, demanding and defying consideration.

Police headquarters. Enright Steel and Mrs. Curlow. Violent scenes. Dr. James doing downright stealing to get along. Isabel, with her hair like gold, and big, violet eyes, made as beautifully as an angel, making her home with the doctor, speaking of him affectionately. It was plain dumbounding.

He heard Aunt Clara come home, and then Bob. They moved about the house, upstairs and down, and he began to cringe. He wanted to think for a long while, but he knew that his moments of privacy were numbered.

Pretty soon Aunt Clara called:

"Tom, dinner's ready!"

"Shut up!" he said to himself. "I want to be left alone for an hour or two." Aloud, he answered: "All right," in a tone that was almost syrupy sweet.

Dinner wasn't ready, of course. Aunt Clara always called a quarter of an hour too soon. Tom relaxed and tried to make up his mind about Isabel, but, instead, kept dreading that he must go downstairs.

Aunt Clara and Bob were both talkative. It was terrible to have to talk to people when there were things you wanted to make up your mind about.

He vaguely considered slipping downstairs and going elsewhere for dinner, but, of course, dismissed the idea and waited miserably.

"Tom, dinner's ready. Hurry."

It might be true this time, so he brushed his hair and got to the dining room, just as the meal was put on the table.

"Here he is," said Bob.

"There you are," said Aunt Clara.

They both laughed as if they had cracked a marvelous joke. Tom began to wonder if he didn't hate them. They certainly had the faculty of getting on his nerves.

Well, if he hated them, oughtn't he to say so and get up and leave the house? It was dangerous to suppress hate. A person was liable to get a complex that way.

"Tom, you're going to take us to the picture show to-night, aren't you?" asked Aunt Clara.

"Of course he is," said Bob. "We've decided for him."

"No, damn you!" Tom said to himself; but aloud he managed: "Oh, all right," with a wry smile.

The very idea of a picture show was repellent, but he had to say yes or else explain why he didn't want to go.

He couldn't explain. If he did he would have to tell them he had been to police headquarters, and if he did that, their talk would clatter like rain on a tin roof for nine days at least.

Two years ago he had been graduated from school, supposedly equipped to meet the trials of life, but nothing had prepared him for situations such as this.

He had taken a full course in psychology, but had never been told what to do if people wanted to chatter and go out when he was in distress.

There ought to be a course in family relations.

They began to eat, and Aunt Clara began to hold forth. Her throat hung loosely, and Tom watched it vibrate as she rambled along.

Aunt Clara was an inveterate bridge player. Her life consisted of having a group of friends that she called "the ladies," in to see her and play bridge. Or else she went out to see them and played bridge.

Yet she imagined herself of immense importance for some reason, and took it for granted every one was interested in her doings. She told each detail of the bridge play that afternoon, and seemed to think Tom and Bob would be overpowered by the recital:

"I never held such miserable cards in my life except at the last table. I was disgusted. Even so, I only missed the prize by ten points.

"And they didn't serve until half past five. I thought I would never get home. That's what makes dinner so late. Time and tide wait for no man."

Oh, thought Tom, if only she wouldn't use proverbs as she did. She brought them out every few minutes in the most triumphant tone, as if she felt that she had originated them.

What he wanted most in life, he realized, was to have an establishment of his own somewhere, and always have interesting conversation at the dinner table. His guests would be important people, who would make bright and witty comments on the topics of the day.

Somehow he got to thinking of Isabel James as bright and witty, although he hadn't heard her say ten words. He placed her at the far end of his dinner table, and watched her smile, and heard her make quick retorts to Senators and generals.

When he brought himself out of it and considered Isabel's actual position at that moment, running away from the police with Dr. James, he wanted to go Bolshevik.

"Mrs. Gilfillan's son has taken a job in Canada. Isn't that terrible? For him to be away off there! She's so worried about him."

"I'd like to be in Canada," said Tom.

Aunt Clara stared at him as if he had suddenly announced that he didn't believe in the Bible.

"A rolling stone gathers no moss, Tom."

"I wasn't thinking of rolling any. I just said I'd like to be in Canada."

"Well, it's a silly idea," he was rebuked. "You've got a good business here. Modern young people are always dissatisfied. There's one thing they should remember. Every one should remember it. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

"Aunty, a bird isn't worth much anywhere. That's no argument against Canada."

Aunt Clara looked at Bob, and Bob looked at her. They became solemn.

"Tom, you're upset. What's the matter?"

Tom curbed himself. He knew better than to encourage Aunt Clara to ask questions.

"I'm just the same as always as far as I know," he answered. "Let's hurry or we'll miss the first show."

On the way to the theater, peace came. He could not account for his sudden change in mood, and was at first inclined to resist it, but the moist odors of the spring evening and the business of driving his car seemed to combine to rid him of a feeling of pressure.

No use trying to decide everything at once, he reflected. Best to yield to circumstances and wait until the show was over and he was home again. Then he would have a long session and recover his peace of mind.

"That's a wonderful orchestra," he offered in a conciliatory tone, as they took their seats.

"You bet," said Bob.

"It's funny how music affects me," Aunt Clara remarked. "I appreciate it so. As soon as I hear it, I begin to beat time."

The feature film had a young business man in it, who won success and a girl at the same time, and by the same processes, so far as a spectator could tell. While it was being shown, Tom found reason to wonder at himself.

The heroine was small and blond, and she fell in love very prettily. He kept thinking how it would seem to have her fall in love with him. Her company, for instance, might come to San Jacinto for Texas color, and might be entertained by some of his friends.

They might meet and he might notice she was distraught. When he pressed her for an explanation it might develop that

there was some kink in the action of her picture that needed to be straightened out.

Tom might come forward with a brilliant suggestion. Then she would introduce him to the manager and they would work together for several days, and gradually she might—

Would Isabel James do these same things as she fell in love? Well, she would never be as cute as the film actress, but there was that look of loyalty in her face. It would be wonderful to see that expression quickened and given to oneself, to watch it change from an indication of an inherent possibility to proof of real devotion.

Here, Tom jumped, surprising Bob and others who sat near him. Was he foolish enough to still dream about Isabel with all that he knew about her circumstances?

Hadn't she run away from San Jacinto, and wouldn't she be wise never to come back? While he was considering these questions, the film ended, and Tom was left in a lighted theater, feeling tragic.

Outside, a storm was blowing up. The wind was coming in heavy puffs, and there was a lot of lightning. The car was buffeted as Tom sent it scudding home, and just as they reached the house a few drops of rain fell.

Aunt Clara and Bob hurried to close the upstairs windows, while Tom put the car in the garage and then went inside and began locking up the first floor.

The lightning flashes came so often, he didn't need to turn on the electricity as he prowled around. It was exciting.

He wondered about Isabel. Was she out on the road somewhere with the doctor, trying to drive to Galveston, or had the old fellow dodged the storm?

His thoughts began to seethe. Somebody ought to take an interest in Isabel James. She should be set free from the doctor so that she could have a respectable life. She had been brought up to live normally among educated people.

It was criminal, her being compelled to jump around the country because nobody would interest himself in her enough to interfere.

"Oh, thunder, I wish I could see her," he breathed. "I ought to try to help her, at least."

He went into the entry hall and turned out the light, leaving downstairs all dark. Before closing the front door, he stopped

at the screen a moment to watch the first big rush of the storm. The turbulence accorded with his mood.

Way up the street, he heard a patter of feet. He stepped outside, upon the porch, and saw some one running in the shadows beneath the trees. It was a woman.

Just as she got in front of the house next door a heavy downfall began. There was a crash of thunder and she dodged, with one arm held up. Then she turned and came straight toward the porch.

At another thunderclap she gave a little scream. She darted up the steps, stumbling at the top. Tom caught her shoulders to steady her. She screamed again and lifted her head. There was a sort of explosion inside him.

"Powder Puff!" he exclaimed.

XI

ISABEL shook off Tom's hands with hysterical strength. She went up on the porch and stood at a little distance. The rain drifted over them.

"It's Isabel James" she said. "Don't you remember?"

"Of course," said Tom; "of course."

That was all he could say. There were no more words in the English language as far as he was concerned. If he could have remembered others, his mouth was too far open to use them.

He had wished for her. She had come. Out of the storm. And the first thing he had done had been to yell "Powder Puff!" at her.

Once more the thunder crashed.

"Won't you take me inside, please?" cried Isabel.

"Of course, of course." How brilliant it must sound.

He led the way to the living room and switched on the lights. They burned dim and blinked. Isabel looked apprehensively toward the windows and ran about the room, drawing down the shades. Tom thought she was afraid of the lightning and helped her. She turned to him with a hangdog expression.

"Oh, merciful Heavens!" she sobbed.

"What's the matter?"

"To think of doing that just instinctively as if I'd been hunted all my life." She collapsed into a chair. "The detective, that awful old man who roars, is following me. Doctor sent me to you."

Her shoulders heaved. Tom almost

sobbed with her. She seemed so beaten, so desperate.

"To me?" he echoed. "Why on earth didn't he take you out of the city? He had plenty of time."

"Our car broke down," she told him. "We missed a train. I didn't know then that the doctor was in such awful trouble.

"He took me to that beastly little hotel near the station, and we stayed in a room until the nine o'clock train was ready. He went out to arrange for the tickets and he came back running.

"Then I found out"—she shuddered again—"that he was in trouble with the law. The detective had been watching the station and was following him.

"Doctor told me to find you, and said he'd get away by himself. We had to run, like burglars, down a fire escape."

She stopped with a moan, and stared fixedly at the floor. She was past tears.

"Doctor said you would help me," she reminded after a little.

"Don't worry." Tom was in a mood to move mountains. "You're all right now."

She looked at him, her eyes wide and panicky.

"You don't understand. I—I must tell you some way. He—that man—is following me. I never dreamed of such a thing until a few minutes ago.

"I seemed to have got safely away, and then, on Carson Street, I heard him shout. He was in an automobile that had driven past me, and he was telling them to stop. I ran. I couldn't help it. I ran through an alley—then to you."

At last Tom woke up. His mind had been floundering as awkwardly as his tongue, and if he had planned anything it was to call Aunt Clara downstairs and arrange for Isabel to spend the night.

But Steel was following her. The old ranger had seen Isabel on Carson Street, just a few blocks away. That meant almost certainly that he would soon be at the door asking for her.

Tom's address had been mentioned at police headquarters, and sooner or later Steel would find that he was in the neighborhood and would guess where Isabel had been going.

Isabel couldn't stay. He couldn't call upon Aunt Clara. An hour, at the very least, would be needed to explain things so that Isabel would be accepted as a guest.

And there was a worse danger. Suppose Aunt Clara should come downstairs without being called, as she might do at any minute. Then it would take two hours to straighten things out, if not longer.

"But, Tom, I don't understand," she would chant. "I come downstairs and find you talking to a strange young woman in my own parlor."

Tom didn't want to explain anyhow, and he didn't want to encounter Steel or make another visit to headquarters.

"Quick!" he said, catching Isabel's arm. "Let's get out of here! My car is behind the house. Come on!"

He took her to the door, then ran back and called upstairs, above the noise of the storm:

"Aunty, the trapdoors are open down at the building. I'll have to go and fix them. I'll be right back."

He heard an answer, but did not wait to understand. Supporting Isabel, he led her in a dash through the rain to the garage. At any minute he expected to hear Steel shout or feel him clutching.

"Get in the front seat," Tom told Isabel as he unlocked the doors.

The engine started without trouble, and he ran down the drive.

"Keep out of sight," he said. "If any one sees you it will make more trouble."

Isabel crouched below the window level of the small sedan. As they passed the front of the house, the rays of the entry lamp turned the rain to a mist of gold.

Tom saw Aunt Clara and Bob upon the porch, staring after him. He turned in the opposite direction from Carson Street. In a few minutes he came to Crockett Park and doubled through it twice.

Swinging out on the upper end of Houston Street, he stopped the car and breathed a long sigh. If he had been a colored gentleman, and had successfully passed a graveyard, he couldn't feel better, he said to himself.

Turning his head, he found Isabel had straightened. Her eyes met his in the gloom, and she laughed. Her voice was tremulous, but he found much to admire in that laughter. It showed pluck.

"What's the joke?" he asked.

"I was tickled because you seem so comfortable. I'm not. I'd like to have some idea what you are going to do?"

Tom whistled.

"I wish you'd tell me. I've started out

to rescue you, but I don't know what the next move is."

However, as they exchanged a few more words, he began to see a way out of their difficulties. His mind worked reasonably well, he was pleased to note, when he was not forced to snap decisions. All he needed was time.

The essential thing was to put Isabel in some safe place as quickly as possible. She must not attempt to leave the city by train or by any of the main highways. She must not go about town where Steel or the police might see her.

They undoubtedly had copies of her photograph by this time, and so would be almost certain to recognize her. She must hide for a few days.

As soon as Tom knew all that had been going on down town, whether the doctor had been captured or not, and what Enright Steel was doing, he could probably find a way to help her. Now he could only move blindly, and he might put her directly in Steel's path, as her father had done.

Where could she hide? The place should be secluded, and the people in charge of it should be reliable. She ought to be in friendly hands. Was anything of the kind available?

It was. Out on the Loop Road, a continuation of Houston Street, was the Armstrong strong ranch. The three Armstrong girls were cousins. Their ranch was operated as a sort of resort for tourists.

It was a small place, just a few acres left of the original family holdings, and it was far enough out of town to be practically cut off from San Jacinto activities.

He told Isabel about it.

"You can spend the night there anyhow," he said. "I don't think it is safe to try to do anything more until we see how the land lies. They are used to taking care of people at the ranch, and it's the last place this man Steel will investigate if he goes on searching for you."

"But suppose he does? I'll just have to take the chance, won't I?"

"Yes, but as soon as I can get some money for you, I can drive you to another town and you can take the train."

"I'll need clothes to travel. My suitcase is at that little hotel, but I have more things at our house. Maybe you can get in there."

"Probably I can get anything you need after a day or two," Tom said, thinking

aloud. "After all, this trouble can't last forever."

"By the way, it would be a good idea for me to get back home as soon as I can. My aunt thinks I've gone down town. If I'm not away too long, no one will suspect that I've seen you. That would throw them off the scent altogether."

She nodded.

"Drive on then."

XII

In a few minutes they were out of the city. Isabel began to smooth her dress and straighten her hair. Plucky, Tom thought again. He began to feel proud of her.

"You're good," he praised.

She made a grimace.

"Am I? Why?"

"To take it all as you do. I expected to have a time getting you calmed."

"Do you consider me calm? You have a lot to learn about me."

"I want to learn a lot."

That was said on impulse. It sounded flirty, but Tom was not flirty. Actually, the words went flying off his tongue, unexpected. He was often startled by such phenomenons later. He could be quick as a flash with Isabel, although with others his wit remained slow.

This made him like Isabel more and more. Tom says to-day that there was no doubt that she had the faculty of inspiring him. There are certain people in this world, he says, who can inspire you. It is a fact of existence that a great many never take into account.

Aunt Clara, for instance, said many times: "Whatever do you see in her, Tom?" This by no means indicated a fault in Isabel. It simply showed that Aunt Clara was not inspired by her.

"Oh, don't say things like that," Isabel protested. "I'm not in a mood to joke with you, even if I'm not weeping."

"I retract the joke, if any," Tom returned, still inspired.

Isabel made no reply to this, but after a moment, during which she looked steadily ahead, she offered:

"I mustn't sail under false colors. Are you surprised that I'm not in a fret because we're running away from some one? Well, as far as that goes, I'm surprised at myself."

"I know I ought to feel badly, but I

don't. Excitement, I suppose. Then again, I must tell you that this didn't take me altogether unawares. I felt it was coming."

"The doctor's trouble?" asked Tom.

"Yes." Her voice was clear, even-toned. She was exact, giving a nice attention to each consonant and syllable that was strange to his ear. He found it winning.

A girl who talked so would not often be commonplace. Even if she quoted a proverb, people would like it.

"You see, Mr. Chester, I have had an idea for several days that the doctor was at his old business again. I found him out before, you know, a few months ago. I made him promise to give it up, but he—oh, he's terrible!—and he thinks I have no eyes and no mind."

She paused and laughed mirthlessly.

"He was so cut up when he had to confess this evening. I hope he's learned a lesson, but I doubt it. I thought he had when we came here. Oh, I don't know what to do. You see, I'm only his adopted daughter, Mr. Chester."

"I know," Tom said.

"He told you? Well, of course, while he kept me in school I had no idea how he made his living. I began to wonder about it during my first long stay with him, two years ago. In fact, I didn't know until then that I wasn't really his daughter. Just what did happen at the office this afternoon? Do you know?"

Tom told of Steel's visit, and of the doctor's confession that Isabel's photograph had been used as a lure for his clients. She uttered a cry.

"So that was it! That's why that detective creature is following me. Oh, isn't it horrible?"

They came to the Armstrong ranch. Tom turned up a drive and stopped near the door of a long frame house. The rain was almost over. The storm was blowing northward, thundering across the plains, while about them, as they got down from the car, there was only a drizzle.

The front of the house was dark, but Tom could see a bar of light striking out from one of the end windows. He knocked. Soon a light was switched on inside, and a tousled, red-haired young lady opened the door to the length of a chain latch.

"What is it?"

"Have you got a room?" Tom asked,

trying to recognize her. "I want you to take in a friend for me. Who is this—Gracie?"

"No, it's Emma."

Just then another woman inside called: "What do they want?" and Emma answered: "It's some people want a room."

"We're all full," was the curt instruction.

"We're all full," said Emma coldly.

There was an implication in this which distressed Tom.

"Emma," he pleaded, "it's Tom Chester. I want you to help me—"

"It's Tom Chester," Emma called.

"It doesn't sound like him," said one voice inside.

"They can't have a room together, I don't care who it is," said another.

Women! There are times when they deliberately court murder. They make the idea pleasant. Tom did not dare to look at Isabel.

"Here," he said to Emma, "if this is the way you treat a cousin—"

"Oh!" cried a voice within. "Is it cousin Tom Chester? Oh, Emma, let him in!"

"Wait a minute," cried the third cousin. There was a scuffling sound, made by some one running in slippers. "Now let him in."

At last they got out of the rain, and through an embarrassing moment Emma and Gracie, both red-headed and in kimonos, looked them over. Tom was moderately wet, and Isabel was sodden. She seemed miserable.

"Now, Tom, explain all this," said Gracie.

"Explain?" Tom groaned. "Explain nothing. All I want you to do is to give Miss James a room and let her stay here quietly for a few days, and if you won't do it for her, I want you to do it for me, as a favor."

Gracie looked at Emma, and Emma looked at Gracie.

"But why," began Gracie, "did you bring her way out here? Why didn't you—" "

Tom writhed. What could he tell them? How could he tell them anything without drawing a fusillade of questions?

Isabel stepped forward.

"I'll explain all about it to-morrow," she offered. "I'm sure you girls will be glad you helped me. My father is in trou-

ble, and Mr. Chester was good enough to take me away from town for a few days. We're ruined—my father and I. You can see that I wouldn't want to stay in San Jacinto."

"Oh!" said Gracie.

"Oh!" echoed from the landing of the stairs, where the third Armstrong sister, Hilda, was listening.

"Hooray!" breathed Tom. "Surely, you'll take care of Miss James, Gracie?"

"Of course, Tom. Don't be so cross. You must admit it was queer, coming out here such a night."

"And with such a drowned-looking creature," added Isabel.

Every one smiled, and the question was settled. In a few minutes Tom watched Isabel climb the stairs in the wake of Emma. Her hair and clothing were in hopeless disarray, and she smiled faintly as she nodded to him over her shoulder. It was a picture that he felt he was going to remember for a long time.

"Who on earth is she, Tom?" asked Gracie, as he went to the door. "I never heard of any people named James in San Jacinto."

"Well," Tom said wearily, "they're strangers. I don't know myself just what the state of affairs is, but I'll find out and let you know as soon as I can. Good night."

"It's the most mysterious thing!" cried Gracie. "And you so interested in her. I didn't know you ever looked at a girl, Tom."

"Well, it won't be mysterious very long," Tom declared. "Not at the rate you're asking questions."

XIII

"LIFE is needlessly aggravating," said Tom as he settled at the steering wheel again. He liked that crack; so he filed it for use at some future dinner table. Then he made up another one. "Too many women spoil the romance," and filed it, too. He began to feel in better humor.

Would the fellow in the film play have carried off things so successfully if he had had aunts and cousins to question every move? That part of the hero's affairs had been eliminated from the picture.

Did it always exist in life? Were great men, successful men, compelled to spend a good deal of their time dealing with family nuisances? Probably so. People

ought to have more respect for captains of industry and statesmen. By thunder, they earned all they got.

Well, by now he must be pretty nearly out of this jam. Isabel was safe for the night. If he could get home before anybody inquired for her, everything would be jake.

If not, things wouldn't be so good, but still he could stand pat that he had gone to the building. Anyhow, there was no use worrying. More men had been killed by worry than disease.

The thing for a fellow who was a sort of gay, wild blade to do was to keep on the alert and knock them over in rows whenever they bobbed up to make trouble. He had been getting away with it so far, and ought to be able to go on.

The night was soft and pleasant again, he noticed. The storm had passed, and stars were beginning to show here and there. This was romance, skimming over a smooth road, caressed by a moist wind. He was playing a lone hand to help Isabel, with all the world against him, so to speak.

And at the end of it, what? Good-by, or *au revoir*? Well, did it matter now? Time ought to think that out later.

Isabel was all right. She really was an adopted daughter, put in a bad position through no fault of her own. Tom was certain. She expected a man to treat her in a certain way, the way nice girls like to be treated.

Furthermore, she was active, clean-cut, vividly alive, healthy. She probably played a good game of tennis. When she expressed disgust for the doctor's activities, she meant it.

If it should turn out they—ah, you know—loved each other, there would be nothing to be afraid of in taking her. If not, he would always know that he had done a noble thing in helping her. By golly, she needed it.

Suddenly, Tom found himself turning into the drive at home. He looked at the house and was reassured. There was a dim light in the living room. Upstairs was dark as if every one had gone to bed.

"Good," he sighed. "Steel hasn't been here. We are safe all around."

He put the car in the garage and hurried around the house to the front door. Before climbing the steps to the porch, he faced back toward the Armstrong Ranch.

"Isabel," he said, "your knight-errant

isn't so poor after all. No, I guess he's not so poor."

Then he turned away, wishing to avoid too great a display of feeling in the direction of the ranch. He had an illogical fear she would be embarrassed by it. He was embarrassed, although alone, at the way his heart was beating, and at the warm little zephyrs that seemed to be blowing about his interior.

"Oh, I like her," he decided. "I sure do like her."

Bearing in mind that it would be well not to disturb Aunt Clara and Bob, he tiptoed to the door and slid the key into the lock. His cheerfulness continued for a moment after he was inside.

Then, as he was pushing the door shut, he blinked his eyes at half a dozen dozing shapes in the living room. It was an uncanny moment. His breathing stopped involuntarily.

There was an exclamation, and Aunt Clara, sitting just inside the living room door, thrust her head forward and looked at him.

"Tom?" she said. "There you are!"

Cousin Bob leaned forward from the other side of the door.

"Yes," he said; "here he is now."

The dozing shapes straightened and stared. Thousands of eyes were turned upon Tom, it seemed. There was a mumble. The living room was full of men.

Two were strangers; one he recognized as a reporter for a newspaper. Then he saw a fierce little face and a wide mouth—Enright Steel.

"Oh, Tom, whatever have you been doing?" cried Aunt Clara.

"I was at the building," he wavered.

"No, you weren't, Tom. Mr. Steel went to look for you there. Oh, dear boy, tell us the truth."

XIV

"Who is this Dr. James?" went on Aunt Clara. "Who is this Isabel person? Where did you meet them?"

It was crushing. Tom thought that the doctor must have been captured and forced to confess, and that now Steel, with the others, would try to make him turn Isabel over to the law.

He couldn't see anything to do. He thought of running, but saw that would only add to his troubles instead of lightening them. Yet, if he didn't run, he must

talk, and he did not know what he could say. He was like a corpse in a field, waiting for them to pick his bones.

Luckily, no one realized how completely he was beaten. When he began to mumble feebly about having a flat tire and wet wiring, and such things on the way down town, they paid no attention.

Instead, two of the men came forward and introduced themselves as reporters, and two as detectives. Steel got up and shook hands with him. All the while Aunt Clara kept asking questions.

His confusion began to clear. He found his heart and nerves quieting, and was aware that something had happened to divert suspicion from him for the time.

Steel asked the others to yield the floor. The old ranger talked along smoothly. What was it he was saying? Oh, yes, he was telling how the police had pursued Dr. James earlier in the evening.

They had chased him from a hotel near the railroad station and had lost him somewhere. There was a sort of twinkle in Steel's eyes as he told the story. That twinkle was very puzzling.

Certainly Steel's manner was entirely different from what it had been during the afternoon. It was almost kindly.

"So down in the Mexican quarter we lost him." Those were the first words to make an impression. "We lost him, the old skinflint." Ah, they hadn't captured Dr. James.

"He dodged us someways," went on Steel, his voice quickening. "He dodged us, and we clean lost him. Well, we took stock and got some more men and began to comb the town.

"We worked right up to about half past ten, and then these boys here happened to make a trip along the canal. So they're the ones that found his clothes, and this note was with them."

Steel held out a sheet of paper. Tom stared at it blankly. Something had been said about it before which he had missed.

"Read it," cried Aunt Clara. "For goodness sake read it, Tom. I can't understand why in the world he should do what he did. Who on earth is she, Tom? Why didn't you ever speak about her?"

"Just a minute, lady, please," said Steel. "Better let me tell it. I want Tom to get it all straight."

Nodding in response to Aunt Clara's injured sniffling, the old ranger went on: "They

found his clothes with this note stuck in the breast pocket of the coat. So it looks altogether like he committed suicide. So we thought we'd better bring it up to you and tell you all about it—"

"Suicide?" asked Tom. "Dr. James?"

That was an impossible proposition. The doctor's suicide could never have happened.

"Most probable," said Steel. "If he didn't commit suicide, he got all ready and then changed his mind. The water there is a plenty deep, and it wouldn't have been easy for a man without clothes to run away from the place."

"Course, he might have bought clothes somewhere, but Galvin has had men checking up on that, and no news so far. Anyways, suicide is likely. I'd commit it in his place."

"I'd have done it long ago if I'd been him. Well, now you read the note and then I'll tell you some more."

"Yes, read it," said Bob Westcott, "and then explain why on earth—"

"Sh!" said Aunt Clara, in rather inconsistent indignation. "Let him read."

Steel gave Tom the folded piece of paper. Aware that every eye was on him, the young man opened it and read:

To MR. CHESTER,
Manager of the Crow Building.

Dear Chester—Forgive a broken-hearted old man who puts all his troubles on your shoulders. You are the only one in San Jacinto I can call friend. I have decided to end everything. When this reaches you I will be dead.

I appoint you my sole executor and want to give all my property to my daughter, Isabel. I want you to act as trustee for her and see that things are cared for until she can take charge herself. Good-by.

J. X. JAMES.

"Why did he do that, Tom?" asked Aunt Clara. "Who is he? Where did you meet them? Why should he say that you—"

Tom began to ramble. He didn't know why the doctor did it. Their contacts around the building had been slight, and there was no reason why Tom should be made executor of the estate or trustee for the daughter, except that there was probably no one else in San Jacinto the doctor wanted to appoint.

Steel took the floor again.

"Well, Chester, all that is neither here nor there. It don't matter why he did it; the big idea is he did it. We saw that the note was addressed to you, and thought

we'd bring it up here and find what you knew about him, if anything, and you've told us that.

"So the only thing now is for you to act on it, if you want to. You'd better let us know what you decide to do. As soon as the girl turns up, of course, you'll have to sort of look after her. Do you want us to send her here if we find her?"

"Here?" cried Aunt Clara. "Why, what on earth would we do with her here? I don't know her. I've never met her. We can't—"

Steel's eyes twinkled once more.

"Well, if we find her we'll let you know, Chester. You can tell us what to do then. You can put her up at a hotel or something."

"All right," said Tom.

Suicide? Executor? Trustee for Isabel? Impossible.

"Now, another thing," said Steel. "Some keys were in his pocket. We knew he had a house about two blocks from here, and we wanted to look through it; so we sent a couple of men over there."

"So probably you better come with us now and watch us lock up. You'll be responsible for his property, you know, and them keys goes to you. Can you come now?"

"All right," said Tom.

"But, Tom—" began Aunt Clara.

"He can tell you when he gets back," said Steel.

As Tom fell in with Steel and the detectives and the newspaper men, and walked over to Dr. James's house, he found that his subconscious mind was able to make him enact the rôle of ordinary human being while his conscious mind remained practically unconscious. It simply could not understand what was going on.

Take charge of the property of a suicide? Phew! Be executor of a suicide's estate? Trustee? Oof! Talk to a comparative stranger for a few minutes during the afternoon, and then before midnight have them tell you the stranger was dead.

Enter a strange house and glance through its rooms. Superintend the locking of the doors and windows. Watch reporters gayly stealing photographs of Isabel from a cabinet, and be afraid to object because you don't want to give it away that you know anything about her at all. Dumfounding. No other way to say it. Plain dumfounding.

"Did you get anything?" Steel asked the policeman on duty at the house.

"Not a thing. The place was closed up tight when we came. Everything was just about the way you see it."

"H-m!" While the others filed out, Steel took Tom's arm and led him into the dining room. Tom let his eyes wander over the polished furniture and noted from its quality that the doctor had lived well. He would, of course. "Say, do you know where that girl is?"

Gulp! The faint twinkle came again in the older man's eyes.

"That's all right; I don't want to find her any more. That note says she's his daughter. Well, I'm old and foolish, I reckon, but not altogether simple. I know where I stand, all right."

"Now, you're interested in her, and I don't blame you for doing what you can to help her. But it would be nice to be sure she was all right after driving her father to the last ditch."

"Well, I do know," Tom admitted. "She came to the house and I took her to a safe place. My aunt didn't know anything about that."

Steel nodded.

"That settles it. You better tell her about this so somebody doesn't break the news to her too sudden. And you tell her she's safe from me, will you? That old devil probably isn't dead, but it's just as bad for her whether he is or isn't, and I'm going to let her alone. Well, come on. Good night."

"Wait," said Tom. "I just want to say that I'm sorry about this afternoon. I did help him to get away."

"But I only did it on her account, and I felt mean when I had to work against you, Mr. Steel. I feel worse now because I see I was foolish. You're all right."

"Oh, thunder," said Steel, "go on home and go to bed. Don't worry about me."

XV

"But, Tom, who are they?"

"Home again," sighed Tom.

He had returned to find Aunt Clara and Bob in the living room, waiting to get at him, and he had put in a quarter of an hour telling them everything; that is, everything from the time of the quarrel between the doctor and Enright Steel that afternoon. He admitted only a casual interest in Isabel.

"I've told you all I know. He is a man with an office in the Crow Building, and she is his daughter."

"And you don't know a thing more about who they are?"

"No, isn't that enough?"

"Enough? Great Heavens, I never heard of such a thing in my life. Here you get us all involved in a terrible affair where the police come into my parlor looking for suicides, and you sneak off and go cavorting around the country with a girl and then you say that is enough."

"It's got to be enough; it's all I know."

Aunt Clara rose with a despairing sigh and went upstairs. Bob followed. Tom was about to turn out the lights and go, too, when she stopped and called to him.

"You've got to let her know about this. When are you going to do that?"

"I don't know; I haven't decided."

"Haven't decided?" echoed Aunt Clara. "Well, when are you going to decide? How long will it take you?"

Tom shuddered. How would he go about telling Isabel that the doctor seemed to have committed suicide?

"If you want me to I'll call up Gracie and tell her," Aunt Clara offered with sudden eagerness. "She can tell Miss James."

"No, no," said Tom. "We've got to be careful. I'd rather do it myself."

"Careful? I wouldn't waste much care on that creature."

"Why not? She is entitled to consideration as much as any other woman."

"Pah!" rasped Aunt Clara, going on upstairs. Then, most illogically: "Well, I certainly would not disturb them out there at this time of night, if I were you. Oh, I hope you won't be so quick to meddle in affairs like this in future."

At last quiet, except for occasional thuds from the bedrooms overhead. Tom lit his pipe and walked to and fro. After all, things weren't so bad. The doctor was out of the way, and Steel was lenient. Isabel was at least safe. Of course—

The doorbell rang and his nerves went on edge. He ran to answer.

"Taxicab, Mr. Chester," announced a youth in leather leggings.

Tom shook his head. As he did so, the taxicab driver held out a folded bit of paper and winked.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Didn't you order no cab? Shucks! I see I'm on the wrong street."

Still he held out the folded paper. Tom opened the screen and took it. Now what? In the name of Heaven, now what? Was this crazy melodrama to go on forever?

"Good night," said the driver. "I didn't mean to bother you."

Aunt Clara and Bob were hurrying down the stairs.

"What is it? What's happened now?"

Tom kept the folded paper hidden in his hand. He must not let them know about it. Whatever the message, it was likely to set them talking for the balance of the night.

"The taxicab driver made a mistake."

"Goodness gracious! It never rains but it pours. Everything happens to-night to give me the creeps."

"We'd better go to bed," Tom urged, leading the way upstairs.

"But what are you going to do about letting her know her father is dead? She ought to be told, Tom."

"I haven't—"

"Why not drive out there first thing in the morning and tell her face to face. I'll go with you if you want me to."

"The morning papers will get there first," Tom objected.

"But goodness gracious, you can't go now."

"I'll see."

He was in his room. He closed the door and unfolded the communication the cab driver had delivered. It was written in pencil on the leaf of a memorandum book.

DEAR CHESTER:

My suicide was just a bluff to fool Steel. It was the best way I could think of to throw him off my trail.

I sent Isabel to you earlier this evening and hope you were able to look after her. I will send you an address where to reach me in a few days. God bless you for a true friend.

J. X. J.

Tom sat down and held his head. The lights blurred, and the room seemed to spin slowly.

XVI

AUNT CLARA spoke from outside the door.

"Tom, I've decided we'd better telephone after all. Shall I do it?"

"No," said Tom. "I think I'll go out early in the morning. I've got to have a long talk with her."

"Goodness gracious, don't you know your own mind two minutes on end?"

"I guess not," Tom said. "Good night."

He might not know his own mind very well, but he could see one thing. This news that the doctor had only pretended to commit suicide was a mixed blessing.

It saved him the duty of telling Isabel of the suicide, but at the same time it put him in a position where he must either let the police know the doctor was alive or keep silent and connive with the old villain to outwit them. Neither course suited.

"Blamed if we wouldn't be better off if he was really dead," Tom commented.

It was half past twelve. He tumbled into bed and tried to go to sleep. Not with immediate success. Too much had happened since mid-afternoon.

He seemed practically to have put on a continuous vaudeville, taking the part of the comedian who gets slapped with a newspaper. Could the whole affair be a sort of joke put up on him by Providence?

Providence, so far as he was concerned, was a capricious agency, toward which you preserved a meticulous outward respect, but from which you expected nothing except surprises.

This was not all a joke, of course. He had met Isabel. That might have been the inscrutable purpose behind all the trouble. You couldn't tell; but if it was the purpose, Providence had taken a roundabout way to go a short distance.

Still, on this earth, things always moved in mysterious ways, and the results were generally beautiful. It was well not to be critical.

The way she held her head was attractive. So was the way she leveled her eyes at you. There was generally a little smile at the corners of her mouth. It was not a demure smile nor an inviting smile, more an interested smile. It said she took pleasure in life, in just seeing and doing things.

Her mouth was attractive, too, he realized. Probably because it had an expression of capableness. It was not the mouth of a girl who is merely pretty, but the mouth of a pretty girl who has begun to understand herself.

He was never sure where his thinking ended and dreaming began. The one blended into the other, and as he slept he seemed to come closer and closer to Isabel. They held a conversation, *such a conversation*. There was a perfect balance of retort and repartee.

And finally, with a wistful little smile, Isabel announced she loved him. He reached out to take her in his arms, and Aunt Clara's alarm rang across the hall.

He scrambled out of bed, ruefully realizing that he was back where he had left off the night before, with Isabel and her father on his hands, and the certainty that it would be difficult if not impossible to get the doctor square with the world.

He began to dress hastily. There was a rustle outside his door, a light knocking.

"Are you going now?" called Aunt Clara. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"Never mind," answered Tom. "I'm going to hustle right out and get back in time for breakfast."

"Humph!" grunted Aunt Clara.

When Tom opened his door he found her still in the hall in her dressing gown, hair in a tangle, and eyes reproachful.

"You don't want me?"

"No, I want to get there before she sees the papers. It would take too long for you to dress."

Aunt Clara made a gesture that tossed all blame for what might happen from her shoulders.

"There's something mysterious about this," she announced. "You evidently don't want me to meet her."

"Later," said Tom, trotting downstairs, "I'll bring her here."

"You'd better make sure she's welcome first."

Tom frowned as he left the house. Aunt Clara was crazy to mingle in this affair. He could understand curiosity, he thought, but why should she want to boss everything that went on?

Oh, well, no use worrying about Aunt Clara. She was generally on the rampage about something. And was getting to be a terrible nuisance, if anybody wanted to know.

The ranch grounds were covered with mesquite and scrub oak with tiny new leaves. Near the door a lone magnolia rose, looking like an overgrown rubber plant.

The thin light of the sun skidded close over the ground, making haloes and hazes. The air was cool and wonderfully fresh.

Gracie appeared, red hair flaming in the early light. She was awed and tearful.

"We knew you'd be here soon," she

said, "so we didn't let her see the newspaper. Oh, the poor thing! Her father committed suicide and you've come to tell her. Isn't it awful?"

Meanwhile, Gracie's eyes were fixed on Tom in an incredulous stare. He was smiling, and she couldn't believe he meant to under such circumstances. He made himself serious at once.

"Has she been down to breakfast then?"

"Yes, the poor darling heard us getting up. We wanted her to stay in bed, but she said she didn't want to make unnecessary trouble, so she ate with us.

"We had to hide the paper in a hurry. We took turns reading it in the kitchen, while the rest of us sat at the table and talked to her."

"Tell her I've come, please, Gracie."

The house was long, with a parlor at one end of the first floor and a library at the other, and the reception hall between. Tom waited in the library. Shortly, there came a light footfall. She entered the room.

"Isabel!" he cried fondly.

"Yes, Mr. Chester?" The reply was cool, astonished. Another shock for Tom. He had permitted his dreams to mingle with reality, had assumed that he was on most intimate terms with her. Now, he was reminded that there was no warrant for such an assumption.

The reminder hurt. He felt that she was going out of her way to set him in his place. However, after a moment of consideration, she smiled, looking him fairly in the eyes, and he forgave her.

She was prettied up now and had evidently borrowed a dress from one of the Armstrong girls. It was of pale blue linen.

Altogether, she was like a picture. Like one of those classical portraits. Blond hair, you know, and pink cheeks. A pretty spring pink, whether natural or otherwise.

Her manner became inquiring.

"Oh," said Tom, "oh, yes. Well, I've got good news and bad news, Miss James."

"Splendid," she cried, "and I really don't mind if you call me Isabel. I didn't mean to be oppressively formal, Mr. Chester."

This made Tom happy. He did not analyze the exact sensation it created until later, but when he did, he realized that it must have been a good deal like the feeling of a puppy, wagging its tail.

"Tom—my name is Tom," he said. She looked toward the window and burst out laughing.

"It's early in the morning for this kind of thing, but all right, Tom, give me your news."

"Late last night, I got word from the doctor."

He gave her the second note. She read it and was puzzled.

"That message explains another which he left with his clothes on the bank of the canal. The police made a copy. Here it is."

Her quizzical expression slowly became a frown.

"Oh, heavens, what will he do next?"

"I wonder?" shrugged Tom. "Whatever it is, I'm pretty sure it will be a nuisance."

"For you, of course." She looked gravely at her foot, which was swinging to and fro as she rested on the arm of a chair. "Oh, I can't believe — why this must have got into the newspapers."

"It did."

She blushed.

"Never! Don't tell me—now that explains what is the matter with your cousins. They've been looking at me in such a peculiar way— My word! They think he is really dead."

"They haven't had as much excitement since the last family funeral."

"What a horrible situation. I'm beginning to hate the doctor, Mr. Chester."

"I don't blame you."

She left the chair and took a few steps away from him, whirling in sudden resolution.

"Well, I must face this. I can't dodge it. After all, he has done a great deal for me. Is there anything more to tell?"

Tom described the visit of the officials and gave the gist of his conversation with Enright Steel.

"The second note came after they were all gone?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What are we to do? Have you thought about that?"

XVII

TOM was surprised to find he hadn't thought about it. He had thought of coming out here to the ranch, but had not gone one step further. He was embarrassed.

"I can't say I have," he admitted, "but

it is sort of working itself out in my mind now. Probably we're the only ones who know he's alive and we'll just keep quiet.

"Let everybody believe he's dead. That's the quickest way out. The whole thing will blow over in two or three days."

Isabel shook her head. Her expression worried Tom.

"But see here, that detective was cheated of some money. So was the woman you told about."

"Are we going to let the doctor cheat them? Mr. Chester, I don't know how much of the money I've taken from him was dishonest, but I don't want any more of it. I don't think I can agree to that for a moment!"

"Of course not, of course not. I overlooked that. By thunder, I must be a kind of crook myself. Now let's see."

Tom had an inspiration. "Oh, look here! He has made me executor of his estate and, therefore, as long as he's supposed to be dead, I can do what I want.

"I'll find some way to pay back Mrs. Curlow and Steel. That will settle everything perfectly."

She approved.

"If you will do that you'll settle things a lot better than the doctor would, I'll be bound."

"Great! Well, I'll go back to town now and start settling as soon as I've had breakfast. I'll get my lawyer and he'll clear it all up by night. Then things will go back on a normal basis, and—"

"And what, Mr. Chester?"

Tom had been standing before her, meditating now and again upon the allurement of her cheek. He had carried on a little longer than was good for him and he knew it.

He wanted to say, "You wonderful girl, I love you." He was not convinced that he did love her; he just wanted to say it. He fidgeted.

"Don't call me that. You've done it half a dozen times."

"Oh, well, Tom then. What were you going to say?"

He tried to be carelessly gay, but did not succeed.

"I meant as soon as everything is settled why—why, I want to have a serious talk with you." His voice became husky. "You're a remarkable—I mean a wonderful girl."

His heart began to race so crazily that

it scared him. He made a defeated move to take her hand. She drew away.

"You're being very silly, aren't you?"

Her smile was derisive, but it put things on the proper basis. The awkwardness that Tom had created faded away. He sighed in gratitude. She was a pretty good sport.

"I suppose I am, but I didn't think so a minute ago. It's all in your point of view."

"Then let's try a sensible point of view," she insisted. "I hoped you were going to say that as soon as things were normal, you could carry out a little plan for me. I can't stay here, you know.

"As soon as you have the chance, you must find my baggage and get hold of enough of father's money to send me away. I've thought it all over and I've decided to go East. I have friends there. I'll visit with them until I can find a way to make a living."

"Oh, you mustn't do that."

"Why?"

"You mustn't think of it." Tom was full of protest. "You're safe here now, so you must stay and learn to care for your property as he directed."

"You forget he's still alive. It's his property. I don't want it. Only a little of what is honestly his to travel with."

"Oh, yes—well, you must stay anyhow. You see—"

Tom stopped, ransacking his mind for arguments. But the cupboard was bare.

"Run along now," she said gently. "You need breakfast. Things go to your head on an empty stomach, you know."

Reluctantly, he followed her from the library. "I wish you would understand, oh, I wish you would understand," he protested inwardly; but he said nothing aloud.

Gracie Armstrong appeared with a handkerchief to her eyes and put an arm about Isabel's waist. Isabel's eyes widened, then she understood.

"Oh, please don't feel badly," she said. "There's no reason to. You see—"

"It isn't like a real father," supplied Gracie.

"Not in the least."

Tom made for his car. In a charitable moment he reflected that his cousins had displayed a nice consideration of Isabel, in view of the fact they hadn't seen the doctor's second note, and so actually believed she had figured in a sensational and un-

pleasant matter. There was a place for women in romance after all. Some women.

XVIII

BOB WESTCOTT had gone to work, and breakfast was over when Tom slid into his chair at the home table, trying to be unobtrusive. He dug hastily into his grapefruit.

"Well?" asked Aunt Clara, who had been watching him over the edge of her newspaper.

"Well, what?" he asked blankly, for his mind was far away. A new trouble had developed, a sort of pain. It had begun as soon as he left Isabel.

There was anxiety in it, and self-disgust. He felt he had cut a poor figure in her presence. He was afraid he had annoyed her. As he had never had such worries before in his life, he was upset.

It was unjust. He was in love, in a way of speaking. At least he wanted to be in love. Were disturbances permitted when a man was in love?

He had gone along for years, wanting nothing, and his mind had always been easy. Now, when he was beginning to really desire something, that same mind turned cagy and doubtful.

If things went on in this way he could only conclude that life was not what he thought it should be. He might even be forced to admit he had been mistaken about it.

Aunt Clara rattled the paper.

"What did she say?"

Tom grunted. "I don't know." He was not going to be too pleasant when he didn't feel right.

"Don't know? My Heavens, wasn't she all broken up when you told her he was dead?"

"Sure."

Aunt Clara watched him eat for a few moments. Her manner said that she was being tried a little too far. *Some* one was coming in for *something* if people didn't look out.

"Of course, I'm sorry for the girl. I'd be sorry for any one in her fix, but still, I can't help wondering—what does she look like, Tom?"

He was beginning his cereal.

"I don't know. She's kind of pretty."

"Oh, I'm sure she is. But what does she look like? Is she blond or dark? Is her hair bobbed?"

"Yes," said Tom, "blond." Then, seeing a movement of impatience across the table, he added: "She has pink cheeks."

Aunt Clara went through the motions of collapsing and groaning in despair.

"Pink cheeks? Oh, my stars."

Tom said nothing. She had aroused imps of stubbornness and sarcasm in him. She started it, he reflected. She could just wait until he was ready to talk. Like begets like. They who take the sword shall perish by it. Funny she wouldn't know that with all her repertoire of proverbs.

He made good headway with breakfast while she was taken with exasperated fidgets. He bit his lip to keep from smiling.

"It's all in the paper, Tom," she said finally. "Every bit of it. Your name is there. Listen."

For reading she adopted a solemn, measured tone:

"MAIL ORDER MAN A SUICIDE

"Police Say James Was Involved in Fraudulent Deals

"Ahem!"

"The discovery of a pile of clothing on the north bank of the canal last night led to—"

"Never mind," said Tom.

"Don't you want to hear it?"

"I know it all. Why read about it?"

Aunt Clara thrust the paper across the table.

"Her picture is in here, Tom."

"Is it? Let's see." Tom tingled as he glanced at the foggy engraving, but forced his eyes away. "Oh, yes, that will give you a good idea of how she looks."

Bang! Crumple! Swish! Aunt Clara left the table and stopped at the door.

"Tom, I simply can't understand you. Here you get mixed up in this fearful affair and you won't talk about it. I believe you're trying to hide something."

"Uh-huh, it's his body. He didn't commit suicide, I murdered him. In a little while I'm going out to murder some more people. I have half a dozen appointments this morning."

"I don't think it's right," groaned Aunt Clara. "Everybody in town knows more about your affairs than I do. I don't know what makes you such a clam. Your mother was never secretive. Not in the least. Neither was your father—"

"Nor you. I know that."

This was meant to be a pointed hint.

It was accepted as such, but not appreciated.

"You ought to be slapped," cried Aunt Clara.

But she went away. Noting a sudden increase in appetite, Tom demanded scrambled eggs and bacon of the kitchen, and demolished them handily when the kitchen produced them.

As he settled back in his chair and got out his pipe and tobacco pouch, the doorbell rang. He heard Aunt Clara hurry to answer. In a moment she came to him.

"It's Judge Pemberton," she said in awed tones. "He wants to see you. He's got somebody with him."

"What can he want?" puzzled Tom.

"That's just what I was thinking," confided Aunt Clara.

Tom went to the living room and found the speaker who had addressed the chamber of commerce the day before, advocating confidence and harmony. How long ago that seemed!

Judge Pemberton was clean shaven and baby-pink as usual. He had a long, narrow face and good sized ears. His hair was white and curly.

He was remarkable for the pleated shirt and black bow tie which he affected—he wore the tie tucked under the flaps of his collar as if it accompanied a dinner coat.

He rushed up and shook hands. An odor of perfume enveloped Tom, for the eminent gentleman used two or three kinds of scented lotions.

"Ah!" was the hearty cry. "Tom, my boy, how are you?"

"I'm well," smiled Tom.

"By thunder, you look well. You look fine." Pemberton stood off and diagnosed him for a moment, with small, intent eyes that moved alertly under sagging lids.

He seemed to find one or two symptoms to worry over, but to think that on the whole there was a good general health average. "No, I never saw any one look better."

"Tom, let me introduce Mr. Groves. He's been in my office about a month now. Came over from Dallas to adjust claims for us. You've probably seen him around town."

Mr. Groves was pale and small, with horn spectacles and a tiny mustache. Tom had probably seen him as the judge suggested, for there were at least half a dozen

of him in San Jacinto. In the United States as a whole, not counting island possessions and territories, there were probably two million of him.

"I'm glad to meet you," said Tom, turning at once to the judge.

Pemberton shook his head sadly.

"Tom, I had a shock this morning. A real shock. I took up the paper and read that my good friend Dr. James had—ah—made away with himself."

"Yes?" exclaimed Tom. By thunder, you simply couldn't tell what would happen next. Yesterday he had listened to the judge under normal circumstances.

At the time he had been wondering if he would ever find any one who knew anything about Isabel. And here was the judge, announcing himself her father's friend.

Aunt Clara appeared in the hall. Tom knew she had been listening, just out of sight.

"Oh, judge," she cried eagerly, "did you know them?"

Pemberton looked her way for a moment, then turned his eyes toward Tom. The young man felt uneasy. There was a purpose in Pemberton's shrewd eyes. What was it?

"I knew Dr. James and his charming daughter well. In fact, I wrote a policy on the good doctor's life. Like all prudent men he took thought to provide for his loved ones in times when things were easy with him.

"Now, there are insinuations against him in the newspapers. I'm inclined to disbelieve them. I scout them. I think James was all right; absolutely all right."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Aunt Clara. "I'm so glad to hear you say that. I was really afraid—"

She took a step forward into the room, indicating that she was aware she had not been invited into the conversation, but would like to receive an invitation. The judge accommodated her, beckoning.

"No need to be afraid at all, Mrs. Westcott. First-class people."

"Tom wouldn't say—"

"It is the matter of his insurance that brings me here," said the judge, firmly overriding her. "As soon as I read that you were the executor of his estate, Tom, I thought I would come and let you know about it.

"He is dead, my boy, and I want to

make the full amount of his policy, ten thousand dollars, available for you at once."

Judge Pemberton paused and smiled faintly. His voice changed when he spoke again. He had two voices, one his full, hearty platform tone that carried to large audiences and gave confident interviews on the eve of election, the other a smiling, complacent whisper.

"You see," said the second voice, "I thought of the little girl."

The declaration hissed and simpered in Tom's ears until it belied its plausible kindness and made him angry. He scented danger.

He did not yet know what the judge's purpose was, but he had a premonition that said, in his own language: "Look out; this old boy is likely to gum the works."

XIX

"IN this hour of trouble," said the judge, pink and soulful but with sagging, baggy cheeks, "her first needs are friends and money. Realizing this, I have decided to make every effort to deliver my company's draft to her within twenty-four hours."

"How?" exclaimed Tom.

"I will get the payment through for her sake."

"That is wonderful," commended Aunt Clara. "Wonderful of you, judge. You like her, don't you?"

Judge Pemberton turned quickly.

"I'm not aware I said anything of the sort. However, it will make me happy to know that she has ample funds at her disposal in this dreadful time."

"Now, Tom, let us proceed with the matter. It will be necessary to make out certain claim forms and secure the doctor's policy. I will then forward everything by air mail.

"The home office will press the matter, and we shall have a check for poor little Miss Isabel to-morrow, or at the outside day after to-morrow."

"Oh!" said Tom.

"Have you made any move to secure authority from the probate court to act as trustee for her?"

"No, I'm going to my lawyer now."

"He hasn't had time," added Aunt Clara. "He went out to see her this morning."

Judge Pemberton frowned.

"No matter, Mrs. Westcott; no matter at all. Naturally, Thomas is not familiar with the course of events in such calamities. Well, then, I'm afraid he can't act as Miss Isabel's agent in presenting the claim."

"If we are to get this money at once, we will have to deal with her. She is the beneficiary of the policy, and can present the claim immediately if she desires."

Tom nodded. He was a little confused.

"So I believe I will go and see her. We must not waste time."

"At police headquarters, a Mr. Steel told me you had contrived to get Miss Isabel in good hands in some way. That is why I came here. You are the only one who knows where she is."

"Give me her address and I'll put the matter through before noon."

"I don't know." Tom hesitated.

"Don't know?" protested Aunt Clara. "Surely, you understand the judge is—"

He blew a cloud of pipe smoke into the air.

"I don't think there is any need for hurry."

Even this faint hint of opposition to the judge's plans evoked a change in atmosphere. Each of the four in the room suddenly knew that the conversation had no single motive. Pemberton's eyes gleamed.

"Tom," said Aunt Clara, "the judge knows what is best. Are you going to dispute him?"

Then every one made a movement of surprise as a new voice was raised. It was that of Groves, and it had not been heard before.

"Why do you say that?" asked the claim adjuster abruptly.

"She is in no need," said Tom. "I'll take care of her."

"But," said the judge indignantly, "that is just what we want to avoid. It will embarrass her to feel that you are advancing your own money to pay her immediate expenses. You don't want to embarrass her, do you?"

"Why, Tom," said Aunt Clara, "I never heard of such a thing. She can't accept money from you. It would be impossible. Oh, judge, don't pay any attention to him. He's like all these modern young people. He has no idea what is proper."

"Perhaps," said Groves, "Mr. Chester doubts that the doctor is dead?"

The plan was to keep quiet and let every one think James had not been heard from. It was the only plan that would positively put a stop to all the trouble and notoriety brought upon Isabel. It was the only plan that would leave her more or less free.

If Tom admitted to the three present that the suicide was a hoax, it would mean a new adjustment of affairs, more explanations. More publicity. Yet he could not consent to the judge's plan.

He decided to go as far as he could without openly admitting anything.

"I do," he said. "I doubt it very much."

"Have you any basis for such doubt?" asked Groves with eagerness. "Do you positively know him to be alive?"

"Of course he doesn't," cried Aunt Clara. "Tom, how can you say you doubt it? Didn't they give you the note right in this room that said—"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" boomed Pemberton. "A true adjuster. Mr. Groves is suspicious of every one, Mrs. Westcott. If you had the doctor here in a casket, he would be inclined to think that it wasn't the right man. It is Groves's business to be suspicious, of course."

"Come now, I want to go and see Miss Isabel and let her know that through her father's foresight and the good offices of her friends, she is dependent on no one. My car is outside. Tell me where to drive, Tommy boy."

"Judge," said Groves earnestly, "I can't recommend payment if Mr. Chester is doubtful. The case is suspicious anyhow."

"Oh, shut up, Groves. I'll recommend it over your head, and they'll pay attention to me, you bet."

Tom met Groves's eye.

"I'm sure it would be better to wait," he said.

"Fiddlesticks!" cried Aunt Clara. "She is at the Armstrong ranch, judge. Go right out and see her. I won't let Tom make a mystery of nothing."

"Thank you," said the judge, "that's all I want to know. Come on, Groves."

XX

Tom knew he was hurt before he knew why. He saw Aunt Clara with her head high, keeping the corner of her eye upon

him and wearing an amused smile. He saw condescending triumph in the judge's manner.

Chagrin numbed him. He felt his lips go down like those of a child about to cry. Smarting about his eyes warned him that actually he was not far from weeping.

The truth grew upon him. They had thrust him aside as a person of no moment. Now, they were pleased at the ridiculous figure they had made of him.

"All right," he quivered; "all right, do as you please."

"Just a minute," called the judge in his booming platform voice. "Come here, Tom, I want to have a few words with you. Groves, Mrs. Westcott, I'd like to talk to Tom in private if you please."

Groves came past Tom, his expression thoughtful. Politely, he tried to look in other directions. Aunt Clara came with reluctance. Her crest was lowered, and itching curiosity contorted her smile.

"You see," said Tom with sudden bitterness, "nobody likes to trust you with information. Did you ever wonder why?"

It was the first time he had spoken to her in temper, for he had come into her house grown and easy-going. The shock made her stare. She turned pale and fled.

Pemberton put jovial hands upon Tom's shoulders and looked at him with merry, sardonic eyes.

"Hol! Ho! Ho!" he laughed softly. "Tom, I'm sorry things happened the way they did. I understand the position."

"You're handling the girl's affairs, and you naturally like to arrange them to suit yourself. But, if you'll pardon me, you're a little new at such things, and you make mountains out of molehills."

Tom's inward disturbances continued, but he was proud to find that he had control of his voice.

"You don't understand," he said; "and neither does my aunt. But don't worry about that. Drive out there, if you like."

"Oh, I think I understand," said Pemberton. Then came his insinuating whisper. "I know little Miss Isabel, you see. I know that no young fellow like you could meet her without being taken off his feet. I'm human; I'm a man, and I wasn't born yesterday."

"Now, that's why I want to talk to you. I want to tell you something that will save you a lot of, well, let us say, a lot of agony."

Tom waited. It was easy to wait, for his internal chemicals were making a new transition. His temper was cooling, his determination rising.

"I have frequently been entertained at the doctor's house, and I have seen a great deal of little Miss Isabel. Isn't she beautiful, Tom? I've always had an eye for beauty, my boy. Damn my soul, a pretty woman can have anything she wants of me."

"Now, Thomas, I'm going to take you into my confidence. I'm going to tell you that it is more than possible she will become Mrs. Pemberton soon. The thing was discussed, and her father was not opposed.

"She didn't quite like the idea of being the fourth Mrs. Pemberton, but she has been melting lately, melting."

"Consequently, I assume that I have every right to visit her and to—ah—help in the administration of her affairs. You must agree to that, Tom."

Tom met the judge's eye. He found a gleam there that startled him. The muscles of the judge's face twitched. These things were controlled in an instant, but he knew that he was courting the visitation of fierce wrath if he considered opposing the judge.

At the same time he saw that the judge was uneasy. This was deep stuff, maybe, but if that expression was not more a sign of weakness than of certainty, then Tom knew nothing at all.

The judge considered him a rival and feared him. And yesterday, at lunch time, Tom had been wondering if he would ever know Isabel's name. And the judge, talking of mental attitudes and harmony, had known her well.

"That's all right," smiled Tom. "That's all right, judge."

Again the jovial hands pawed him.

"Makes a difference, doesn't it, my boy? Makes a difference, eh? Of course, what I tell you is strictly in confidence. Particularly at such a time as this, when her grief—you understand?"

He ought to be shot, thought Tom. Anybody who whispered about a girl in that sly way ought to be shot. Damn it, Texas was getting too civilized.

"Certainly, I understand. I wish you luck, judge."

"That's the ticket. Now, you're talking like a man. I admire you, Tommy,

I always have. You're a good deal like your father. I always admired him. Well, good-by, I'll step along now."

"Good-by."

Tom saw the judge through the door, and turned back into the house. Aunt Clara immediately appeared from the dining room, her handkerchief at her eyes.

"Tom, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for speaking to me as you did. The idea of bursting out that way, right in front of those two men."

He did not answer.

"Tom!" Her tone changed. "Please don't be angry with me. I will admit I shouldn't have interfered probably. Although you were awfully foolish, dear."

"To treat a man like Judge Pemberton as though he was some one who couldn't be trusted! Why, it was absurd. But I'm really sorry if I hurt your feelings."

Ah! Always her way. He had noticed her at it with Bob. To nag and question and interfere until patience was exhausted, and then to talk as if it didn't matter. To talk about hurt feelings as if they were of no consequence. Why didn't she consider feelings first?

Tom took up the telephone, still refusing to answer. She stood a short distance away, with parted lips. He gave the number of the Armstrong Ranch.

"Hello, Gracie?" he said. "Oh, Emma. Emma, this is Tom. Tell Miss James I must speak with her, will you please?"

In a moment came Isabel's voice.

"Mr. Chester?"

Even in his temper he felt a glow. He did like her voice.

"Isabel? This is Tom." Because Aunt Clara was there he put an emphasis on the given names. "I'm sorry to bother you so soon, but something important just happened. Your fiancé is on his way to the ranch."

"What?" Unqualified astonishment. Tom laughed.

"Well, I mean Judge Pemberton. He told me he was your fiancé, but I had a suspicion he wasn't. He was a little too anxious to tell it."

"Oh, my goodness! Well, Mr. Ch—Tom, that's silly. He has no right to say that. Can't you keep him from coming? I don't want to see him. I really don't."

"No, I can't now. It's too late. He wants to see you about your father's insurance. He wants you to file a claim on

some policy. I thought I ought to warn you. We can't file a claim, of course."

"Oh!"

"You get that, do you? There's somebody listening here, so I don't want to say any more. Can you get rid of the judge all right?"

"Certainly; I'll simply refuse to have anything to do with it."

"Can you get away with that?"

Isabel laughed, a little coolly.

"I think I can. I've looked after myself a great deal. If that's his business, I don't see why you let him come out here."

"I couldn't help it. My aunt knew where you were, and she sent him."

"Very well," said Isabel. "Is that all?"

"Yes, good-by," cried Tom, in consternation. "I'm awfully sorry."

"Oh, don't bother about it. Good-by."

He stood staring at the telephone. He had attempted to warn Isabel and punish his aunt at the same time, and had made a botch of both jobs.

Isabel seemed to be annoyed. Dismay, such as he had never known before, dazed him for a moment. Then he turned and saw Aunt Clara. It was her fault.

"There," he said savagely, "you've got another earful. Hurry up and tell everybody you know."

He started away, but her voice stopped him, trembling, enraged.

"You little wretch!" She was white, and her eyes were burning. "You meet that silly, yellow-headed thing, and then turn on your own flesh and blood and take your nasty temper out on them. Don't you dare say such things to me, Tom Chester. Don't you dare sauce me. I won't have it."

It made him feel nauseated and weak. Keeping silent, he crossed the hall and got his hat. When he was at the door, she resumed her tirade in a lower tone.

"I was working in your interests all along. I saw the judge liked her, and I sent him out there because I could see it was for the best. It would be a fine thing if he would marry her and take care of her—the best thing that could happen."

Tom sprang through the door and made for his car at a run.

XXI

TRouble was afoot, and time was flying. He would get Isabel away from the

ranch; he would put her on a train for the East. He must keep on the alert, keep battling, until he was sure she was safe.

"Well, Tom, I might make those settlements if the probate court would ever agree to let you act as executor, but I don't think it ever will."

Huh? Oh, yes; it was his lawyer talking. He had come here to arrange for the settlements with Steel and Mrs. Curlow. They must be attended to before he saw Isabel again.

Surely, something was wrong with the world. People were supposed to meet and mate. Everybody accepted it as a matter of course.

Yet, when Tom Chester attempted anything of the kind, the most unheard-of people tried to raise difficulties. It almost looked as if there was a conspiracy against him.

"That note of the doctor's is hardly sufficient authority," the lawyer continued. "Certainly if any one objected you could never act.

"And if you were made executor, you couldn't get an order to make any settlements until we had advertised for all claims against the estate and had waited the proper time for them to be filed."

"But," protested Tom, "I want to get rid of Steel and Mrs. Curlow. I don't want them hanging around. They only make it unpleasant for Miss James."

"Well, I can call upon them and tell them their claims will be taken care of as soon as possible, but that is all."

"Do that then," said Tom.

Now, police headquarters. He must get square with some one. He must establish one friendship and feel safe in one quarter. So he was telling Emory Galvin the whole story, omitting nothing.

"You see, Emory, I'm mainly interested in looking out for the doctor's adopted daughter and making it as easy for her as I can. As I say, I'm going to square things with Mrs. Curlow and Steel as soon as I can.

"So I'm wondering if you can't let your end of it drop. I mean, quit hunting the doctor, although you know he's alive. He'll probably never show up to make any more trouble here."

"Tom, if nobody wanted to prosecute we wouldn't worry much about him anyhow. I'll pass out the word to go easy.

I'll give a lot if you'll tell me where he went to, if you ever find out yourself. It beats me how he managed it.

"It isn't like this was an Eastern town with half a dozen suburbs. That fellow had to cover long stretches of highway and, so far as I can make out, he never stopped at a single garage or filling station.

"Maybe he got on a freight train, but the yard detectives were looking for him."

"He's foxy, Emory."

"Oh, they're all foxy." Emory squinted. "Well, Tom, you're playing square with me; so I'll tell you something. That's this, I'm sorry old Pemberton has mixed into it. Sorry for your sake."

"Why?" gulped Tom.

"Well, there's this girl in the case, and where there's a girl and the judge, there's generally trouble. He's likely to raise the devil with you. I—now, I can't say much more, Tom. He's got a lot of political power here. Watch out."

"What on earth—"

"That old ram keeps this office in a stew. We wouldn't dare touch him except on a murder charge, you know, and he doesn't commit murder. At least, he hasn't yet."

"But I'm telling you the truth, Tom, when I say if he'd been a Chinese or a Mexican he'd have been shot or lynched before he was forty.

"Why? Oh, what use is there in my saying anything more—except, just for instance, he's always and eternally advertising for stenographers and secretaries, and hardly any of them stay with him more than a few days, if you get the idea."

"Judge Pemberton? Why, he's one of the most prominent men in town."

"Don't I know it, Tom? And don't he know it? All the old-timers swear by him. Your Aunt Clara does, I'll bet. But he's been damn near the penitentiary twice in his life."

"Honestly?" Yet the judge could rise calmly and make speeches. Listening to him you would never believe he thought of anything except to keep in harmony with the great forces of success.

Listening to Emory, you wouldn't believe he could hold up his head in public. Was everything in the world upside down?

"If your aunt could talk to one of his private secretaries, she wouldn't believe what she heard. She wouldn't believe such

things could happen, let alone that the judge was mixed up in them.

"But, say, he's clever. That stunt of his was a good one, Tom. He didn't expect to find you especially interested, you see? He only knew what he had read in the paper.

"Suppose it had been true? Suppose the doctor had committed suicide and left her in the care of a man who was almost a stranger? And then the judge came along, promising ten thousand dollars and being sympathetic?

"Why, Tom, the chances are she'd have fallen on his neck. She'd have been the judge's fourth wife inside a week if he had wanted her to be his wife. If not, she'd have been in worse luck.

"Oh, take it from me, the judge hardly ever makes a miscue in a scheme like that."

Now for the office. Just a few things to do. Write a check. Then see about getting Isabel's baggage from that little hotel. Time was short and trouble was afoot.

Judge Pemberton, at this very moment, was probably inflicting himself on her. Making love. Courting, the judge would call it. Isabel was in actual danger. And Aunt Clara had put her in danger after all Tom had done to protect her.

The car was parked on Houston Street, and Tom was hurrying toward the Crow Building. Suddenly his way was blocked.

When he looked up he found Judge Pemberton, with eyes bloodshot and teeth showing in a grin of fury. It was almost terrifying to encounter deadly anger twice in one morning. You wouldn't believe people could get so mad, if you didn't see it.

"Did you," asked the judge—"did you call Miss Isabel by telephone and advise her not to file that claim?"

"I did," answered Tom, doubling his fists.

But no physical encounter was intended. The judge drew back, trembling, working himself up.

"Your aunt telephoned me about it just now. All right, young man, you seem to need a lesson and you'll get it. By Heaven, you'll get it. Nobody in this town ever tied up with me and didn't have a chance to be sorry about it."

Tom sneered.

"Keep a confident attitude, judge. Keep in harmony."

Dad had always said "You're never licked as long as you are fighting." Dad was right. Let them do their worst. They could all go to hell. The judge. Aunt Clara. Everybody.

The Crow Building elevator shook and sobbed an echo to his mood. At last it stopped, and he got out to go to his office. The freckled office boy, who had been waiting near the shaft, seized his arm, pointing back into the car.

"Jiggers!" said the boy.

"What's the matter?"

"Th' detectuv is here again. Beat it, quick!"

For a moment Tom reeled in dismay, then brightened.

"The detective? Oh, Steel? Never mind; he's all right now."

"Oh!" cried the disgusted office boy.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

Solemn and patient, Enright Steel sat in Tom's office. He extended his hand when Tom entered. His eyes twinkled. He was like a calm day in the turbulence of that morning, but Tom could detect purpose in his manner, too.

"By the way, I just stopped to see my lawyer. He'll arrange to pay you back the money you sent the doctor as soon as he can. He'll pay Mrs. Curlow, too. The doctor left his property in my charge."

"Uh-huh," nodded Steel; "thank you. That's reasonable, I guess."

The one-time ranger seated himself and put his right leg over his left and watched his foot swing. Something in its action displeased him; so he put his left leg over his right and coughed twice. Tom fidgeted.

"Tom, I don't know just how to get at this, but the fact is I'm here to make a kind of declaration of war."

XXII

"WAR?" groaned Tom. "I thought we had called quits. Must our war go on?"

Steel contemplatively produced a plug of tobacco, bit off a corner, and made succulent, musical sounds as he stowed his chew in one cheek.

"Well, Tom, yes and no. I mean the old war is over. This here is a new one. But we start even this time, both toeing the same mark, and may the best man win."

"May the best man win?" was Tom's cry as he noted a familiar implication in the words.

Steel grinned and spat.

"I may be crazy, and probably am," he said; "but if Judge Pemberton can try it at his age, why shouldn't I?"

"Great guns!"

"Now, Tom, I couldn't get to sleep last night for thinking about her." It was amazing, thought Tom, to see Steel sitting there, chewing tobacco, leathery and hard as nails, yet with a shy glow of hope in his eyes. "Her picture, that is, because I've never seen her."

"She's the prettiest little thing God ever made, Tom, and I've been looking at that there little photograph night and morning for two months."

"Well, what did I come here for? To see her, of course. And wouldn't I be a fool to go back without doing it? That's the way I reason."

"I can see your side of it," said Tom weakly.

Steel got up from his chair, extending his hand.

"I never had a real idea of trying it until this morning. When I saw what he was thinking of, and saw he was still in his right mind, I thought maybe I wasn't so crazy after all."

"I'm willing to admit I might be, but I've got to see her and find out for myself. Now, you gave the judge her address, didn't you? All right, give it to me."

"I'll go to her and introduce myself all proper and fair, and not a word will I say that could scare her or hurt her feelings. I promise that."

"I was r'aring yesterday. To-day I play cards like a gentleman. Come on, now, start fair. If you win, I hold no grudge."

"You want her address? You could get that anyhow."

"I suppose I could, but I play a Texan's game. I ain't afraid to ask you to give it to me nor to tell you what I have in mind. I ought to see her anyways. I ought, at least, to apologize for rushing her around the way I did."

Tom pulled himself together, gripped Steel's hand.

"All right, I'll tell you where she's staying. Go easy when you meet her, because she's afraid of you. I hope she sends you chasing."

Steel returned the grip, then wiped a drop of yellow fluid from a corner of his mouth.

"I mean it now, Tom." The Panhandle drawl was musical but determined. "I'm going to take her flowers and I'm going to talk as sweet as I know how."

"Just because you're a kid you think I've got no chance. Well, you'll see. I come here to San Jacinto for a wife, and I'm an old ranger. As such, a wife I'm likely to get."

The elevator gate clanged. There came a succession of footfalls. A young man appeared at Tom's door, coughed, and said: "Oh, pardon me, Mr. Chester, I wanted to see you."

"Just a minute," said Tom.

The young man stepped away from the door, and Tom looked at Steel again.

"If I don't win, I hope you do," he said.

"That's just what I was sayin' to myself, Tom. Well, so long."

Steel's place in the office was promptly taken by the young man. For the moment Tom was hardly conscious of the newcomer.

How was Isabel feeling toward him? Perhaps he could find out if he could talk to her over the telephone with no one listening.

What would she think if Steel was to go direct to the ranch now and ask for her? What was the judge going to do, and how soon would he do it?

Freighting, he dropped into his swivel chair, and the youngster, in an excess of politeness, bowed twice. Tom was fascinated by the shiny sleekness of his visitor's hair, which was parted in the middle.

"Mr. Chester, you remember me? I'm George Percy. We live out near you."

Tom smiled. It was queer to him to see fellows only a few years his junior overawed by the atmosphere of business, and to have them address him as "Mr. Chester," instead of using his first name.

"I thought you were away at college, George."

"I didn't go," said George Percy. "I thought I would work a year before I started. I can save up more and, you see, I'll be a little heavier, too. I want to make the football team."

"I'm working down at the telephone office, and I study electricity at night. I don't know just what I'm going to be yet, but I think I'd like to be an electrical engineer."

"Good idea," said Tom.

"Well, it was my father's idea. He said if I worked a year I'd get more out of college. It's pretty hard to pick courses, you know, unless a fellow knows what he wants."

"For instance, in high school I always liked chemistry, and I sometimes wonder if I oughtn't to be a chemical engineer instead of electrical."

"I don't think I want to be a C. E., because there's too many of them, but my Uncle Bill says good ones are scarcer than ever. He's crazy for me to go East to school. He was a Phi Delt, you know, at—"

"I see," said Tom, "now—"

But George Percy was launched on a subject dear to his heart.

"Mom thinks I might make a good newspaper man, and she wants me to take a lot of English, but I don't know. I can write a little, of course, but I've always had more of a knack for mechanical things."

"I fixed our radio last summer, and so I guess I'm cut out for an electrical engineer after all. It's hard to decide—"

"Yes, it is," said Tom. "A man wants to think over his career carefully. But say, George, I'm awfully busy, and I haven't much time to talk to you about it. Suppose you come back next week?"

George Percy eyed Tom seriously. It was queer to watch thoughts shift behind the boy's nicely shaped forehead.

"Well, thanks, Mr. Chester, but that wasn't what I came to see you about."

He seemed surprised that Tom needed to be told this.

"Oh—"

"I just wanted to ask you Miss Isabel James's address. I mean wherever she is now."

"What?" Tom got to his feet.

"You see, we live just next door, Mr. Chester, and I know her pretty well. She's a lot of fun, and so, seeing she's had trouble, I thought I ought to call."

"Well, the paper said her father had left things to you; so I thought you must know where she was. I could tell she wasn't at home, of course."

An exclamation came to Tom's lips, but he suppressed it, and so stood silent and questioning before George Percy. George Percy blushed.

"Now, honestly, Mr. Chester, I've just

got to see her. At a time like this, I'd feel mean if I didn't."

"It isn't as if I was just a schoolboy. I've got a job, and I don't have to go to college if I don't want to; so if she needs somebody to take care of her, somebody that knows and understands her, why, I'll do it."

Great guns! Yesterday no one in San Jacinto seemed to know who she was. Now it looked as if he had been the only one who didn't know.

This was something for the old sense of humor to work on, and he managed a wry smile. Tom and Enright certainly had their work cut out for them. They were new entries in a big field.

"George, she is at my cousin's ranch on the Loop Road. The Armstrong Ranch. And remember, now; we start from scratch and may the best man win."

"What's that, Mr. Chester?"

"Never mind, George, I was just quoting another friend of Miss Isabel's."

"Huh? Who was that? Ed Dilworth? Say, listen, I hope you didn't tell him where she is. He's just a measly little roughneck, Mr. Chester. If he goes to see her, he'll just as like as not take his ukulele along. That's how much he knows about things. I hope you—"

"Ed Dilworth hasn't shown up yet," said Tom. "If he comes I'll refuse to give him the address unless he promises to leave his ukulele at home."

"Well, you better, because he'll just go out and bother her. I'm telling you."

"What time are you going out, George?"

"I can't go till after work this afternoon, but I've already got permission to leave an hour early."

"I'll tell Ed she won't see any one till to-morrow. I'm your friend, George."

"Thank you, Mr. Chester."

George Percy left. Tom opened his desk and hastily got out his check book.

"Are you alone?" asked the freckled office boy, appearing at the door.

"Unless you count yourself," said Tom, shaking a fountain pen.

"There is a man who wants to see you when you're alone," said the boy. "He's been waiting in an empty office down the hall, and he asked me to watch until that other fellow left. He gave me a dime."

"Tell him I'm alone, and tell him to hurry."

Tom dropped back in his chair. Now what? Life was a condition where a fellow no more than got brushed off before something else fell on him.

XXIII

THERE was a secretive rush. A little man entered the office and closed the door behind him.

"Can you lock this?" he asked. "I want to make sure no one sees me here."

Tom bolted the door, staring over his shoulder. For a moment he had been puzzled, then had recognized Groves, the insurance adjuster. Here was something funny.

Groves wore a suit of herring-bone pattern which looked old, but which had been pressed until trousers and sleeves had knife edges and the cloth looked as if it was about to crack.

Groves's shoes were polished to military perfection, and his collar and tie were neat, unobtrusive, and clean. But Groves himself was in a state of excitement.

His expression was habitually solemn, and it was evident he took pride in his propriety and discretion, but now his eyes were wide and gleaming behind his glasses. His tiny mustache moved jerkily, so that Tom thought of rabbits.

"I'm taking a big risk in coming here," he said, "but I thought I ought to warn you."

"What in thunder is the matter?"

"The—the old man is on the war path." Groves said it dramatically. He hesitated over "old man," uttering the words in a daring plunge of disrespect.

"Judge Pemberton?"

A solemn nod.

"I'm much obliged, but the judge told me about that himself."

"I know," nodded Groves, "but I don't think you could ever imagine what he's doing. He says he is going to have you arrested. He is going to swear out a warrant against you."

Had the judge sent Groves over to throw a scare? It seemed so.

"He won't get a warrant, I'm sure. I was talking to Emory Galvin this morning. Galvin knows more about this than the judge."

Groves shook his head.

"Don't be too sure, Mr. Chester. Don't underestimate, please. I've been in his office long enough to know what he can

do. I've watched him get away with things you wouldn't believe could happen."

It was puzzling. The little fellow seemed to be acting on his own. And he was only repeating what Emory Galvin had said.

"He is heartless, Mr. Chester, absolutely. He's a tyrant. Did you notice how he bullied me this morning? He knew I was right. He knew we shouldn't put in that claim. Yet he rode over me and threatened to get me in bad with the home office by going against my recommendation.

"He'd do it, too, and he'd also tell lies to get them to pay it. All I would get would be a call-down from the head adjuster."

"Uh-huh," grunted Tom. "What else now? How will he have me arrested?"

"He knows the prosecuting attorney well," said Groves in a low tone. "He says he'll go to him.

"And what do you think? He has hunted up this Mrs. Curlow. Just before I left the office, I heard him make her promise she would give evidence against you if he called upon her."

"Mrs. Curlow?" argued Tom. "She won't stick to that. My lawyer is going to let her know that she will get her money out of the James estate. It's the money she is after."

Again Groves shook his head.

"Your lawyer saw her before she came to our office. The judge only laughed when she told him about that. He said your offer to settle was as good as an admission that you were mixed up in Dr. James's confidence games."

"Then he offered to pay her some more money for giving evidence. You should know what that means. You called the turn when you said it was money she was after."

Tom was worried.

"He can't get anywhere by dragging me into court. He ought to know that. Dad and I were in court every day for six weeks, once, in a title case."

"But, Mr. Chester, he doesn't care what happens in court. He just wants to make trouble for you and make you let go of the case altogether."

"He says if you don't let go he will get a warrant against Miss Isabel, too. He says it will be easy on account of her photograph. That's his ace card."

"Here's what he said to me: 'Tom will think twice before he will drag her into a lot of notoriety. I'll soon bring that boy to his senses.'"

"He did, did he?" Tom trembled with rage.

"Mr. Chester, if he gets that warrant it will mean that the police will have to arrest you. It will all be in the newspapers. You'll have to give bond and everything. Your people will be scandalized.

"If he gets a warrant against Miss Isabel, she will be in the same boat. Will you want to face all that? Will you want her to face it? Do you see how cold-blooded he is?"

"Let him be cold-blooded. Let's see whether he gets away with it or not."

Groves nodded.

"That's why I came. I thought maybe if I told you, you could put up a better fight. It's really a bluff, you see. He doesn't want to use a warrant, even if he gets one. He wants to frighten you. He knows that a trial would probably see you acquitted.

"But I thought maybe you wouldn't know what to do if nobody helped you. I mean if he was to spring it all suddenly, and you didn't know what he was really aiming at. You couldn't call his hand then. You'd just have to go slow. Then he'd go and scare Miss Isabel.

"He's bound he's going to make her marry him. He's been planning that for a month. He talks to me about her. It nearly drives me frantic to hear him."

"Groves, you're right by thunder. You have done a lot for me. I don't know how I can thank you. But why in the world are you doing it? Just because he bullies you?"

Groves stood silent a moment. Tom could see that it was agony for the adjuster to reveal personal secrets. He was a man who enjoyed mystery.

"No, Mr. Chester, not altogether. You see—I like her—Miss Isabel. I've been there at her house with the judge. She's been awfully nice to me, and—well, I'll tell you the truth, I'd do anything for her. I'd die for her, I think."

"Phew!" exclaimed Tom.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing—only so many people admit they like Miss James."

"Oh, do they? Well, of course they would. She's wonderful. There are few

like her, Mr. Chester, very few. She's the Flower of San Jacinto. That's what I say."

"Second the motion."

Groves pointed in the general direction of Pemberton's office, which was in another building on Houston Street.

"When I think how awful it would be if he should get her, I nearly go wild. He's crazy, Mr. Chester, that's what it amounts to. Everybody would say he was crazy, if it was on any other subject. You know what I mean."

"Yes," Tom said, thinking aloud, "it is supposed to be all right to be crazy over women. Why is that?"

"I wish I knew." Groves looked at his watch. "Goodness, I must go. Isn't there some way I can get out of this building without going out on Houston Street? Suppose the judge should see me coming out the door? He'd—"

"Here," said Tom, "is a key to the freight elevator. Kindly leave it in the lock. It's the last I have."

XXIV

TIME was short. Trouble was brewing. Tom began to act on impulse. At about two o'clock, he pulled up before the Armstrong house once more, a little dizzy at his own activity.

The open country was sleeping and shimmering in the sun. Isabel and Gracie apparently had been for a stroll in the yard. They emerged from behind a clump of shrubbery on the lawn.

Isabel was extraordinarily beautiful, Tom thought, as he watched her come toward him through bright light. Her hair was cut in a full boyish bob, and her expression was thoughtful. Altogether, there was a look about her that said—well, no matter.

Tom never completed this thought. Emotion prevented him, partly yearning, partly worry over the fact that any one so desirable must soon be won.

Gracie was on hand, happily, or Tom might have forgotten to speak.

"Goodness, are you here again?"

"Oh, yes," admitted Tom. Then he made an attempt to hide the fact he had been temporarily hypnotized. "Yes, I had to come out again."

Gracie went off toward the house.

"I suppose you must transact some more confidential business. I'll run away."

Isabel waited.

"I want you to come out for a ride with me," said Tom. "Will you get your hat?"

"Do I need a hat?"

"You will want it, likely. I've got your baggage here in the car, do you see? Things have been piling up on us. We've got to take enough time together to find out if we have minds, and, if we have, use them. I'm sure you can't stay here."

"Very well, oughtn't I to tell the Armstrongs I might not come back?"

"No, I'll telephone to them later. Hurry. Three men at least plan to buzz around you this afternoon. I don't want them to show up before we leave."

Isabel ran inside while Tom kept an anxious eye upon the road to town. His plan was almost too simple, he thought. He wanted to get Isabel away from the ranch and beyond reach of the judge.

It was so obviously the right thing for him to do that he was afraid the judge had guessed it. A man who had so much power that he worried Emory Galvin and awed Groves, might be counted on to put on some kind of a storm. And Tom was sick of storms. Also sick of the judge.

These wild men were a red-hot proposition, when a person stopped to think about them. There were some who were so fat and red faced and worldly that you liked them in spite of their failings.

But Judge Pemberton was long faced, pink, and innocent looking. His animality was the selfish, calculating kind. When it finally came to light and surprised you, you were disgusted. You wanted to step on him.

The road remained deserted when Isabel appeared again. She was wearing the suit she had worn the night before, and was carrying her hat. Gracie came to the door and waved to them as Tom drove away.

"Safe!" he exclaimed as he turned into Loop Road, with his back toward San Jacinto. "Now, be ready for anything. I've got money for your railroad fare in my pocket; so this trip can end in New York or Boston, as far as you are concerned."

Isabel looked over her shoulder at the three hand bags on the floor of the car.

"Considering you are the same man who told me this morning that I ought not go East, you are acting queerly," she said. "What's the matter? Did I turn out to be a bad bargain?"

Tom laughed. This was a regular girl. Quick to act, and with a quick sense of humor.

"But I'm not the same man. I've been through a lot. All morning people have been coming in and telling me they loved you, and I'm worn out. I can't stand another minute of it."

She clasped her hands about her knee as she sat beside him.

"Who, please? Don't tantalize me."

He stole a glance at her profile and the beautiful lines of her shoulders, and sighed.

"Oh, Judge Pemberton, and Enright Steel—"

"Steel!"

"Yes, but not your old enemy. He has reformed. He wants to bring you flowers and apologize for rushing you around."

"I'm glad you came for me. I don't want to see him."

"So? There were others."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, all impossible, I knew that. Mr. Groves, and George Percy, and possibly even Mr. Dilworth and his ukulele."

Glancing sideways again, Tom found a faint smile about her lips. He took a fresh start. "Isabel, you are the Flower of San Jacinto, and the prettiest little thing God ever made. At least, that's what they say. Anyhow, you're popular."

"You are so darned popular that if you stay here one of the newspapers will probably get up a contest for you. They will call you Miss San Jacinto, and all the men in town will sell subscriptions, each subscription counting ten thousand votes. The man who gets the most votes will be the winner."

"I'll give you ten thousand votes now, if you'll stop joking. Do you mean that little Grovesy, and the judge, and Mr. Steel, and George Percy, all came to see you? Why? What did they want?"

"You know what they wanted. They wanted to come crowding around and be silly, as you call it. The judge is more definite. He wants to marry you."

"Take me back, please. It sounds exciting."

Tom told of his morning. They discussed Judge Pemberton.

"He is bound to make trouble as long as you're on hand, but I don't see how he can do anything when you're away. He can't do much to me, even."

"He'll be sore at having the wind taken

out of his sails, but unless you are actually melting—let me see, are you? No, not a sign of it.

"Well, unless you really want to be the fourth Mrs. Pemberton, you can't afford to worry over his feelings."

"I see," said Isabel thoughtfully.

Tom had taken a dirt road across country to one of the highways. For a long while he had been doing an average of forty miles an hour with San Jacinto at his back. Now, he eased his pace and found himself staring at a little roadside eating place.

"Golly, I forgot to get lunch," he cried. "Did you have any?"

"Yes, indeed, at twelve o'clock."

"Can't you eat again?"

"No, but do stop and have something yourself. I'll look on."

"You can sit on the side lines and root. An empty stomach is bad for me, you know. You said so this morning."

The eating place was run in connection with a gasoline and oil station. It was a narrow shack, built like a freight car, with a coffee urn, a lunch counter, and some heavy crockery at one end, and a single table set on a carpet of shavings at the other. A fat little Mexican was in charge. He offered hamburger sandwiches and coffee.

"What else have you?" asked Tom.

"That ees all. Hamburger rare?"

"Medium," said Tom, "and the coffee well done."

He led Isabel to the table which had four chairs pushed under it.

"Take your pick," he said. "I'll give you four guesses as to where you sit."

Isabel selected a chair and Tom sat at her elbow. There was something decidedly cheerful about this, he discovered. He had her all to himself. They weren't apt to be interrupted.

"I have a dream," he said; "a wonderful little dream, that some day we'll sit like this in a cozy home of our own."

Isabel smiled at the dingy hut.

"A place like this just measures up to my ideals," she said; "but I would provide the feminine touch. I'd make a pair of curtains out of a flour sack and hang them at that window."

"Can you make curtains out of flour sacks? No wonder so many are after you!"

The Mexican brought Tom's sandwich.

A very thin pad of ground meat lay upon one slice of bread, a thick cross section of onion upon the other. The Mexican sighed heavily and went back to the lunch counter, where he leaned upon his elbows and stared out the door.

Tom pushed the onion aside and began to eat the sandwich.

"Are you going to waste that delicious tidbit?" asked Isabel.

"I won't eat it unless you take a slice, too. Here, I'll have him bring one—"

"Never mind."

The Mexican, with a solemn air, reached under the counter and produced a worn ukulele. He placed it on his round stomach and strummed a few chords.

Tom turned his head.

"Good glory, another one. How can a man chaperon you when you knock 'em over in rows?"

Isabel laughed.

"Oh, you're delicious!" she cried.

More color came into her cheeks and Tom tingled. His heartbeat stepped up several stages, into the realms of high frequency.

"So," said Isabel, ending a long silence, "if I'm going East, I ought to go now."

They were back on the road. The view ahead of the wind shield was of rolling country touched with new green and swept with sunlight. Texas was beautiful. There was something, an indefinable something, in its beauty which came right through the window with the breeze.

"Yes—if you're going."

She made a little gesture.

"I'll go to Baltimore. But I don't think I ought to go so far with just my hand baggage. Do you think you could pack a trunk for me and send it on after I'm gone? You have the keys to the house."

"Well—"

"No," she said hastily, "you couldn't do that. You wouldn't know what I want. But I ought to have my trunk. I might have to stay a long time."

Tom said nothing. He didn't like to consider the details of her going.

"See here," she proposed, "why couldn't I pack it myself? Couldn't you drive me into town and leave me at home for an hour or two? Surely, no one would look for me there. I could pack and leave the trunk and you could get it to-morrow and ship it after me."

Tom glanced at the sun. Going back would not be the safest thing to do, but probably Isabel was right. The judge wouldn't look for her at her own house. At the moment the judge seemed a bugaboo, anyhow. It was hard to believe that he could be troublesome.

"I guess so," he agreed. "We wouldn't get there until after dark. Surely, why not?"

"I'll be careful about lights," she offered. "I'll only use those in the back rooms."

"Probably you can take the train at half past nine right from San Jacinto. It's hardly possible that any one will be at the station to bother you."

"Of course," said Isabel, "I only need an hour at the house. Let's do that. Oh, my goodness, this is becoming a real adventure. This is romantic."

"This is," said Tom. "Talking to your numerous admirers is not."

XXV

He turned the car at the first opportunity, and they began running through a sunset world toward San Jacinto.

Suddenly Tom's exhilaration left him. He saw he was going to be left alone in San Jacinto. He was going to be sad. Why, this was just about his last chance to talk to her.

The last chance ought not come so soon. There were things he wanted to say, things he wanted her to understand.

He drove jerkily, now crawling and treasuring each moment of their time together, then speeding up as a feverish excitement gripped him.

Every once in awhile he found himself thinking foolishly of matters that were waiting at his office, silly routine matters. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Isabel and studied her profile in the twilight.

He began to worry about the idleness that held his tongue. He ought to be talking to her. She was leaving at half past nine. He was going to miss her.

He hadn't realized he would miss her. He had been thinking only of getting one up on the judge. He was a chucklehead.

"Chucklehead! Chucklehead!" He almost said the word aloud, for it kept whispering in his ears. How was it possible to feel so about Isabel when he had known her scarcely more than twenty-four hours?

He ought to say something. She would think him angry or stupid. She would become bored with him. He made up things to say, approved them, tried to utter them, and remained silent.

His tongue began to feel atrophied for lack of exercise. And the road slipped away to the rear. The twilight deepened.

Tom switched on the lights.

"I guess I'd better turn on the lights," he said.

"Yes, you'd better," agreed Isabel.

He wanted to laugh and say, "I did turn them on." An obvious remark like that would loosen his tongue, and for the rest of the ride he could be amusing.

But he wasn't able to say it. He tried, but a long sigh prevented. Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed. He gave up the idea. What was the use? A spell was on him. Nothing could break it.

An hour passed. The roadway widened. An arc lamp appeared. Suddenly he was following a city street. They were nearly home. Three more blocks and he would come to Isabel's street.

He stopped suddenly, swerving to the curb, and pulling up under a magnolia that reached and fluttered in the night overhead. His heart stood still.

"Isabel, I love you."

"Oh, don't, Tom; please."

There was agony in her voice. Why?

"But, Isabel, I mean it," he pleaded, in a panic. "I know you don't think I'm serious, but I am. I want you to know it. I don't want you to go away without promising—"

"Tom, please drive on. Take me home. Don't be silly at such a time as this."

"Please stop saying I'm silly," he argued fiercely. "I'm not silly when I'm asking—when I'm telling you this."

He was afire now. The thrill of action, of attack was on him. "Why can't we be engaged? It would put an end to all this trouble.

"You wouldn't have to go away even. You could stay here, and we'd simply tell everybody to mind their own business. Isabel—"

"Stop, Tom!"

"Don't you care for me?" He put all his soul into his begging. "Can't you tell me that? Won't you just say you like me a little?"

She drew away from him, face averted.

"I'm afraid I do."

"Afraid?" protested Tom. "Why?" He tried to take her in his arms.

"Don't," she gasped. "Oh, please! I didn't say that to flirt with you. I am afraid I like you. Or even that I love you, as you said."

"I'm afraid because I know people can't fall in love in so short a time. They don't fall in love under such circumstances. It's simply incredible."

Tom laughed hilariously.

"But we've done it. Why be afraid of that? It's a fact."

"It isn't a fact, because we know it can't be. Love doesn't come from arguing like this. Love proves itself."

Again Tom sought to kiss her.

"I'm trying to prove it now. Oh, please, Isabel—please—please—"

For a moment his lips touched her cheek. Then she thrust him away with a determined movement.

"Take me home, Tom," she shuddered. "You mustn't do that again. No—"

He started the car.

"But I'm going to," he cried wildly, "when we say good-by at the station. You love me, Isabel, and you can't say no."

"I don't—oh, Tom, if you persist in acting this way I'll call a taxicab to leave my house. I'll run away from you and hide. You—why, you are worse than Steel. You aren't half so considerate."

Tom eyed her soberly.

"But you do love me," he asserted. "You said so."

"I don't know whether I do or not," she retorted. "That's what I mean. I don't know."

"I know, and I know that I love you. That makes an engagement. So now let's announce it, and then you won't have to go."

"Heavens! Nobody in San Jacinto would respect you or me if we did that. Don't you see you're absurd?"

"I'm crazy," laughed Tom, "and I know why. Look, here you are at home, all safe and sound. You see you can trust me after all."

Isabel laughed despairingly.

"You're impossible," she said. "What's the value of trusting you when you insist on making me uncomfortable?"

"I don't know," he said, as he helped her to the ground, "but there's a lot of value. I'll explain it all later."

The doctor's house loomed before them,

dark and deserted. The neighborhood was quiet in the chill of a spring night.

"Give me the keys," said Isabel, "and run on down the street as quickly as you can. Your car lets people know there's some one stopping here."

Tom hesitated.

"I'd better let you in," he said, "and take a look around."

"Are you going to be sensible?"

"How?"

"If you come up with me?"

"No."

"Then you can't come. Give me the keys."

"All right, I'll be sensible."

Tom led the way toward the entry.

"I'll pack my trunk as fast as I can," Isabel whispered. "Then I'll—what will I do?"

"Come down to the door here. I'll move the car away around the corner and walk back. Here you are."

He had opened the door, after fumbling in the dark of the veranda for the keyhole. Now, he caught at her hand in the darkness and drew her toward him.

"Tom, no!"

"Please, Isabel, we are engaged."

"No, you said you'd be—"

"Sensible? Well, isn't this—"

A sound of hasty footfalls on the wooden floor of the veranda caused both to stand rigid. Shapes gathered in the dark behind them. Then an electric flash was turned on them and the voice of Judge Pemberton rose, trembling in fury.

"Ah, ha! Now, I've got you! I've got you both! Blast you, I knew one or the other would turn up here some time."

XXVI

Tom's reaction, of course, was to decide to release Isabel and take a less embarrassing position. Isabel was wildly anxious to get free.

But Tom had a grand, flashing moment of second thought. Of what amounted to rare insight. Isabel was almost out of his arms when he clasped her firmly and glared over his shoulder.

"Put out that light, you old fool!" he said, and then, with an unconcerned air, bent his head and kissed Isabel, who was too surprised to resist.

This daring scored so heavily that for an instant the light was actually switched off and Judge Pemberton was heard to

groan. Then the light came on again, and the air was rent with fury.

"*By Heaven!* That's your idea, is it? I'll damned soon bring you both to your senses. I'm going to arrest you both and send you to the penitentiary so fast you'll—"

The flash light sent rays through the open door, and Tom caught a glimpse of a switch button in the narrow hall. He reached out and pressed it, lighting the hall lamp.

With a bow to Isabel, he passed her in, then blocked the doorway as the judge and another man attempted to follow.

"Keep out!" ordered Tom, as he made to close the door.

"Don't shut that," threatened the judge. "This man is a detective, and he'll break it down if you do."

Tom was disturbed. He refrained from closing the door, but still blocked the way.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked.

"Isabel," the judge called past Tom, "you let me talk to you a minute. I'll tell you about this young man. I'll soon let you know what he is. He's afraid to let me talk. He's afraid—"

Tom glanced at Isabel. She leaned against the wall, one hand pressed to her breast. Her eyes seemed reproachful, but she gave no sign of heeding Pemberton.

"Beat it!" said Tom fiercely. "You're through, judge."

Pemberton went wild.

"Doherty!" he cried. "Come on, we'll get in all right. We'll—"

The man who accompanied the judge pushed to the front. He was stocky and thick-lipped.

Isabel uttered a cry.

"Let them in, Tom. Don't try to—"

It was an immensely thrilling moment. Tom felt it. He was going to fight. Fight in Isabel's presence. For Isabel. He laughed. It was really too good.

Last night he had found the presence of the police in this affair so disgusting that he had decided to get out of it as quickly as possible. Now, he was going to fight a policeman to stay in.

The detective scowled, forming a new estimate of Tom. He had heard men laugh on the edge of battle before. It usually meant a tough fight.

"Get next to yourself, boy. I'm comin' through."

"No!" said Tom, and it was a war cry.

There is no telling where it would have ended, for Doherty was probably skilled at rough-and-tumble fighting. Tom might have been put out of commission more or less permanently, and Isabel might have been carried off.

At least, they always thought that the judge intended to carry her off and try to argue her into marrying him. If not, there was simply no telling what he had in mind.

However, the thrilling fight never began. As the detective measured his distance and Tom doubled his fists, edging forward, a sound of running came from the lawn. Some one clattered up the steps, stumbled, fell flat, and rose, babbling furiously.

"Hey, what's going on over here? Hello, Mr. Chester, what's the matter? Is the judge trying some of his foolishness? Don't pay any attention to him."

George Percy! His hair sleeker and shinier than ever, his twenty-year-old cheeks fiery red. His football chest prominent in a gaudy V-necked sweater. Tom smiled at the boy's excitement. He couldn't help it.

"Young fellow," announced Judge Pemberton, "you'd better not meddle in this affair or you'll go to jail."

Once more Tom laughed.

"Come on in, all of you," he said indulgently. "Come in and talk it over. I suppose it is less trouble."

He turned back into the hall and guided Isabel into the living room. She switched on the lights as they passed the door.

"Oh, what have you done?" she breathed.

"I've announced our engagement," he answered. "Now, let 'em rave."

He put her in a chair. Judge Pemberton, Doherty, and Percy came in, and all stood blinking. Tom had won an advantage, somehow.

Whether it was because George Percy was on hand or because of the commonplace effect of chandeliers and easy chairs, the greater part of the judge's thunder was gone. Not that the judge knew it at the moment.

"You're wise," he said, "to let us in here, because a fight would only have made your case worse, Tom Chester. This officer is here to arrest you, and as for you, Miss Isabel—"

"Don't worry, folks," said George Percy derisively, "that isn't an officer. He's only a private detective. Mr. Steel

told me the judge tried all afternoon to have them issue a warrant for you, Tom, but nobody would pay any attention to him."

Doherty looked sheepish, but the judge did not weaken.

"You cursed little whelp," he said, "I'm not through yet. I'm going to get a Federal warrant. Tom, you've been using the mails to defraud. Mrs. Curlow has the proof."

"It looks like you had been helping your father, too, Miss Isabel, so now I'll tell you, by Heaven, I'm going to have you arrested and put in jail. You can't turn against me and make me the laughing stock of San Jacinto. No, you can't."

"I'll drag you both into court, and I'll make you sorry you ever saw me."

"Judge, quit fooling," answered Tom promptly. "You know this is all a bluff, and you know it isn't working. I'm going to do as I please, and Miss James is going to do as she pleases."

XXVII

"You bet she is!" Every one was startled, for this came in the rumble of a well-known, rather terrific bass voice. "You bet she is, and I'm here to tell you."

The door to the doctor's house had been left open. Now, Enright Steel appeared in the hall.

"Hello, Tom," he cried. "Pretty slick you are! Telling me where she was, and then carrying her off again."

"Well, the reception committee is all here. George was watching this house and the judge, while I waited over at your place with Eddy Groves. I hoped I could see you before the judge did, but it don't matter."

As Steel finished, the little adjuster appeared beside him. Tom stared at the odd pair. What was going to happen now? How did they ever get together? Where had they come across George Percy?

Oh, of course, Groves would know about Percy. Groves had been entertained here with the judge.

Well, one thing was clear; the plan to save Isabel the embarrassment of meeting all these suitors had failed. Only Ed Dilworth was missing.

What did she think of it all anyhow? H-m! Nobody could tell what she thought. She was blushing a little, but she seemed perfectly cool.

Steel put out his left hand and leaned against the door frame. He smiled at the judge and the private detective.

"Well," came his dry, Panhandle drawl, "has the judge been telling you about this warrant he's going to get? Well, if he has worried you at all, you can rest easy now. Because he'll get no warrant."

The judge straightened. His eyes flamed. He took a step toward the door.

"I'll have one for both Tom and Isabel in an hour."

"No, you won't, because you can't leave here until I say so," smiled Steel. "You see, judge, I have one for you."

Steel said it so softly that no one got his full meaning for a minute. Then Tom's heart turned over and he burst into laughter. And the judge scowled until he looked as though he was trying to hold a spoonful of spring tonic on his tongue.

"I'll bet you did," shouted Tom. "When you say something, I know I can believe it. Let's see it, Enright."

"What the hell are you talking about?" growled the judge. "A warrant for me? You're a liar."

Steel produced a document with an official seal, and thrust it into the judge's hands.

"There she is, made out ag'in' you and the Widow Curlow for conspiracy against Tom Chester. I've only got to make up my mind to use it and you'll come straight to headquarters with me."

"Bosh," snapped the judge, "this is insanity. There's no evidence against me anywhere. You don't dare to serve this officially. You don't dare arrest me."

Then came the surprise of the evening. No one knew just what would develop. The judge's front was so firm and his influence in San Jacinto so strong that it seemed he might not yield.

Tom was beginning to think rather wearily that this argument could easily last until midnight. And he wanted to talk to Isabel.

But little Groves bounded forward to the center of the living room and thrust his mustache in the judge's face.

"I gave the evidence," he shouted. "I heard you conspiring with Mrs. Curlow to have Mr. Chester arrested. I heard you offer her a bribe. I told them about it, and I'll tell again."

Pemberton clenched his fists. His voice died to a whisper.

"You saw—you told them—you did, you little rat—"

Groves moistened his lips and coughed.

"You go to hell," he said faintly.

Tom, Steel, Doherty, and George Percy all saw the humor of this unforeseen defiance. They all applauded Groves's heroism and went into hysterics at sight of it, and at hearing him use profanity to which he was so obviously unaccustomed. Their laughter shook the house.

Pemberton brushed Groves aside and started out of the room, trying to hold his head high, but he faltered in his step, stumbling as if the rug was rumpled.

"Judge," cried George Percy, "if you ever bother Miss Isabel again, I'll break your head."

"Go to hell!" was the sullen reply.

"No!" shouted Groves shrilly. "You go to hell, you old bully. You go to hell yourself. And I'm not working for you, do you hear? I wouldn't work for you if you were the last man in Texas."

Enright Steel had no intention of using his warrant. He had secured it merely as a threat, because Emory Galvin had told him what the judge was doing, and he had considered it ungallant and disgraceful in a race where all contestants were supposed to start from scratch and let the best man win. So he stepped aside to permit the judge to pass out.

There was a shrill cry and a collision as Pemberton passed through the doorway. He was flung back into the room. Aunt Clara was upon them.

"Oh, Tom!" she demanded, her throat quivering. "What on earth has been happening? Mr. Steel came to the house and said you had run away from Armstrong's with this Miss James.

"Where have you been? What has happened? Are you engaged to her, Tom?"

Aunt Clara sent a hostile glance toward Isabel. "The judge said this afternoon that she had been using the mails to rob people. Oh, Tom, dear, please listen to me. Stop and think before you leap blindly into—"

Again Tom had two reactions. The first was to take a conventional course and explain to Aunt Clara diplomatically and soothingly. To explain patiently and endlessly.

But they had been crowding him rather

far. He disliked clamor. So, again, his second thought was more appealing. Why not teach them a lesson? Aunt Clara needed it. They all needed it.

He crossed the room deliberately and lifted Isabel from her chair into his arms. She struggled only faintly.

"Engaged?" he said. "Shucks, aunty, who told you that? We're not engaged; we're married."

"Married? You can't be!" shrilled Aunt Clara, while Isabel jumped and tried to free herself.

Tom held her tightly.

"Oh, of course, we haven't had time to bother with a minister and a license and all that sort of foolishness, but why worry over details? We're modern young people."

XXVIII

ALMOST a year later, to a day, the speaker at the Pequenito County Chamber of Commerce weekly luncheon meeting took for his subject the importance of the right attitude in selling.

He was a slender man with white hair and ruddy complexion, who had become the leading inspirational speaker in the county since Judge Pemberton went West during the Christmas holidays, after a stroke of apoplexy.

Tom Chester sat at a table near the door, and when the speaker finished, he cried: "You're good, John; you're good," and then wondered what an investigation of John's private life would reveal.

It was curious, but you never knew from looking at a man, just what you might expect from him. Particularly if you happened to oppose him in some project he cherished.

Tom passed through the lobby of the Hyacinth Hotel and went down Houston Street. At a newsstand he paused for a package of tobacco, and helped himself because the proprietor was busy.

"Hey there, tough guy!" called the proprietor. "How you like being married? Hey?"

"I'm for it," said Tom stoutly. "I'd tell you to try it yourself if I thought you could find anybody that could understand what you think is English."

"That's all ri'," grinned the Greek. "That's all ri'. You ain't so tough no more. You don't scare me."

A little farther on, Tom gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Well, for the Lawd's sake! Where did you drop from?"

Here was Bill Lewis, big as life.

"Oh, dad had a contract down in Corpus, and I've been stuck there since last summer. Say, I hear you got married?"

"I did," said Tom proudly. "We just came back from our wedding trip."

"You don't say! The old honeymoon, hey? Well, Tom, wasn't it kind of sudden? I didn't hear a thing about it till you sent the announcement."

"Why, no," answered Tom, "we were engaged from about this time last year. Everybody here knew about it."

"Gee whiz! Who was she? I didn't know—"

"Come on up to the office," said Tom.

For, positively, he would never tire of the amazing story of his courtship.

"On the level," he told Bill, at last, "I don't know just why I said that about being married without a minister or license.

"I didn't plan to do it. I didn't think at all, much. It was impulse. Well, you'd think it would have upset everything, wouldn't you?"

"Wouldn't I?" gasped Bill Lewis.

"But it didn't! It was pure, outright inspiration. At least, that's the way it turned out. Isabel nearly fainted, and Aunt Clara pretended to faint.

"Everybody else looked at everybody except Isabel and me, and for a while not a word was said.

"Then Enright Steel said: 'By thunder, boy, I'm with you! That's the way to hand it to us!' And one by one they all filed out. I got rid of them that way quicker than any other, and that was all."

"All?" protested Lewis. "Wasn't everybody off you for life? And wasn't Miss Isabel sore as a boil?"

"Oh, yes; but that didn't matter. Isabel knew I would make good, and the rest didn't get a chance to talk because, instead of carrying out the scheme of marrying with no license, we separated and went through a regular and proper engagement."

"Well, I'll be darned."

"But, Bill," said Tom, "the one thing I never got over was what made Steel come around to my side so fast. You know that old boy was the one that really saved the day."

"He went out to Armstrong's to see her, and he met George Percy and Groves

there. Then, when he went back to San Jacinto, he saw Emory Galvin and heard what the judge was trying to do, and got mad and organized the whole plan of getting a warrant for the judge. Which saved my life."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Bill. "Why did he do that? It's been puzzling me. He was supposed to be your rival."

"Well, you're going to die laughing when I tell you."

"All right, let me die."

"He went out to Armstrong's and, asking for Miss James, he met Emma. They talked quite a long while, and—well, that's the answer. He was taken with her.

"She was more nearly his age, and she was Texas born and bred. She understood him. They were married about two months after it was all over."

Bill Lewis laughed, but did not die. Instead, he broke off to say:

"By thunder, I just happen to think—there's a fellow named Groves down in Corpus right now. He's a reporter on a newspaper.

"They had a bribery investigation not long ago, and somebody offered him money to keep quiet about some phase of it. He said: 'You go to hell!' It was all in the paper."

Tom laughed.

"Yes, I hear he's doing well. He was a made man from the day he learned to say that."

"But what became of the doctor?" asked Bill after a while. "Did you ever hear from him again?"

"Did we? Great guns! We heard from him about three minutes after Isabel stopped scolding me that night and we became engaged. He came walking downstairs and blessed us.

"That was where he had been hiding. In his own house. He got in there after we locked up on the night he was supposed to commit suicide. He'd been there through all that uproar and hadn't said a word."

"He was an old scoundrel."

"He still is. He thought when he came downstairs that everything had been settled beautifully, and that all the trouble was over. He began thanking us and laughing at the job we'd worked on Steel and Mrs. Curlow.

"But he didn't laugh long. Isabel lit

on him like a swarm of bees, and at the end of the scene he promised to reform. I've had two or three scenes with him since, and have made him promise to reform.

"But he's out in Waco now, running a mail order business, and every once in a while the Secret Service men give me a tip, and I have to go out and make him stop doing something that's a little bit too good to be true."

It was near five o'clock. Tom consulted his watch with an uneasy air.

Bill Lewis smiled.

"You've got to go home, haven't you? Well, I'll run along."

"Gee whiz! When I met you a year ago, you didn't have any idea all this would happen, did you? If I had predicted it, you would have laughed at me. You wouldn't have believed it."

"You sure wouldn't have believed then that you'd be married and back from your honeymoon in another year, would you?"

Tom put on his hat with an air solemn and wise.

"A year ago," he said, "I was only a kid."

THE END

Slaughter in the Smoke House

A STORY OF OLD TICKFALL, TELLING HOW HITCH DIAMOND, THE BLACK TIGER OF THE PRIZE RING, FOUND A WORTHY CUB TO FOLLOW IN HIS SIDE STEPS

By E. K. Means

THE sunset hour in Tickfall spread a mist of purple and gold over the village, a gossamer veil which floated in from the great swamp and concealed from view many of the unlovely sights of the negro settlement called Dirty Six. The honeyed fragrance of ripening figs permeated the sordid neighborhood and made the hour sweet for two dusky lovers.

Under a fig tree in the back yard of a colored citizen named Juice Stain, there were two tubs and a big iron washpot containing soapy water. The week's laundry had been done for several days, but the aqueous content of those vessels, barring accident, would remain unmolested until they were needed again. A few chunks of charred wood lay around the iron pot, raked from underneath when the wash lady had concluded her task.

From the fig tree to a post of the fence, at just about the level of a man's nose, there stretched a clothesline, partly rope and partly wire—an excellent device to

straighten a man's backbone when he went out at night to look at the stars and hung his chin over the line. In the yard there were two broken chairs, the abandoned headboard of a bed, a length of rusty stove-pipe, the feathers of several chickens, and a hound pup—and over all the purple veil of the evening.

On a rude bench close beside the tubs sat Silver Tune and Pearl Stain, enjoying the stolen intimacy of young love, which glorified their squalid environment and made them think that the fog-hung trees were draped in bridal veils.

"I reckin we ought to go an' tell de folks at de house," said Pearl, who had been secretly engaged to marry Silver since they had both been away to Tougalou College the year before. The girl was tall and thin, and the school had made her conscientious. What education she had received had given her the idea that these clandestine meetings under the tree were not exactly proper.

"Ef you tell all yo' kinnery about our weddin', dey will raise a loud hallelujah chorus an' make a fuss dat will bust us up," Silver replied, putting his arm around her waist and drawing her down so suddenly that her feet pushed against the washpot and emptied it for next week's use. "An' say, Pearlie, I found a two-room cabin with a lean-to over in the other end of town, and de nigger who owns it has so many pickaninnies dat he wants to sell out an' buy a bigger house."

"Look how de fog is blowin' in from de swamp," Pearl remarked conversationally.

"He says he's got such a large an' growin' fambly dat it won't be long befo' he'll have to buy de opery house so his chillun will all have a place to set down," Silver continued; "but two rooms an' a kitchen lean-to will be big enough fer us at fust."

"But nobody don't know yit dat we's even thinkin' about gittin' married," Pearl objected. "I don't think it's proper to talk about a home dis early in de program. Dat ain't actin' eddicated. Look how rusty dat ol' washpot is."

"We'll keep our washpot scoured up wid wood ashes, an' when we's done usin' it we'll put it under de kitchen flo'," Silver said. "De kitchen is high up off de groun', an' de house sells fer three hundred dollars—one hundred per each room."

"Don't push me off'n de bench, Silver," Pearl told him. "All dat ole warsh water is sloppin' back dis way. Stop shovin' an' crowdin'!"

"All right, Pearlie—ef nothin' won't satisfy you but bustin' de news to de ole folks, le's go an' do it now," suggested Silver, as he rose to his feet and dragged her up.

"Don't git so soon," Pearl protested. "Whut's we gwine to say?"

"Whatever I say might be my las' words," Silver said gloomily. "I reckon you better kiss me good-by befo' I speak. Lawd, dis job of bein' a civ'lized college cullud pusson is a awful nuisance! Befo' we went off to college we wouldn't had no need to ax de old folks. We could go an' git married an' let 'em find it out."

"I feels kind of all gone inside," Pearl giggled, hanging back reluctantly on Silver's arm as they neared the house. "I don't feel like my eddication ain't done me as much good as it ought to, because it ain't gimme no backbone."

Silver proceeded without answering, and the girl dragged along beside him. Soon

they stood before two aged and withered people sitting in the dusk upon the front porch of the cabin.

"Uh!" Silver said abruptly. "Me an' Pearlie is fixin' to git married."

"Dar now!" Pearl's father grunted.

"Huh!" Pearl's mother responded.

The young people stood shifting restlessly from one foot to the other, and plucking aimlessly at each other's hands. There was an awful silence, punctuated at last by the hound pup, who had followed them, and who was now lying upon the porch, scratching fleas and striking the elbow of his hind leg upon the floor in a monotonous drum beat, as if sounding a retreat for the adventurous young lovers.

"I wishes to ax," began Silver, pulling himself together, "kin we git married?"

"Naw!" Pearl's mother said in a cold, decisive tone. "Naw, not at all. Naw, indeed!"

"Aw, listen!" Silver mumbled. "Us is tryin' to do dis up right accawdin' to de teachin' of de college an' de books on manners, an' look whut we git! Dat ain't de way to answer a civil 'terrogation. You ought to say—"

"I ought to say, 'Git out an' good night!'" Pearl's mother spoke calmly and with absolute finality. "Ef dis here houn' pup wus bigger I would say, 'Sick 'im, Spot!'"

"Huh!" Silver grunted.

"Pearlie, git in de house!" her mother ordered, pointing to the open door.

Without a word, Pearl dismally entered the house. Just at that time what she had learned at college appeared to her to be a "wrong steer."

Trying to appear uncrushed by this domestic tyranny, Silver began:

"I have tried to act decent an' up to date accawdin' to eddication, but ef you think you kin turn me down—"

"Shut up!" the old woman commanded. "Ef you stand dar until dis pup grows up, you'll shore git bit by a dawg befo' you leave!"

II

THE Big Four were waiting for something to happen. For a week affairs had gone too smoothly to interest them. They sat under the chinaberry tree, idly wondering whether the colored population of Tick-fall had become so wise under the expert tutelage of their mentors that they had no

further need of advice. Could it be possible that all of them had mastered the science of right living?

The interest of the quartet revived a little when two tough-looking negro men came stamping down the street in heavy brogan shoes. They stopped for a moment and gazed at the Big Four, and then walked over to where they sat.

"Kin us two boys talk our troubles to you fellers?"

"Suttinly, Coop," Vinegar replied eagerly. "We's glad dat you hab troubles, so dat we kin hear you talk. I hope you hab a big trouble, so you'll make a heap big talk. Whut ails you?"

"Me an' Enter is atter a coon," Coop announced briefly.

"Four-leg or two-leg?" Skeeter snickered. "Whar is yo' coon dawg?"

"A two-leg coon," Enter replied disgustedly.

"Whut might de varmint's name be?" Figger Bush asked. "I ain't know we had such a ondesirable citizen in town."

"Silver Tune," Enter told him. "He wants to git married to my gal sister."

"I don't see no real objection to dat," Vinegar declared. "Marriage is frequently done, an' sometimes de young people live happy ever after."

"Yes, but look who sis wants to marry!" Coop snapped.

"Silver is kind of queer fer a black," Pap said thoughtfully. "He's a kind of girlified nigger. He went off to college, an' it ruint him. He come back talkin' in a nice little sissified voice, an' he has cute little flapperified motions wid his hands, an'—oh, shucks! When I see a femalious man I feel like kicking his spinal colyum clean up through de top of his hat, so it would stick up above his head like a hitchin' post!"

"Gwine off to school shore made a change in him," Figger Bush said wonderingly. "Pussonly, I'm glad I ain't no scholard. One time dat nigger tol' me he had to read himself to sleep eve'y night. My good gosh! Think of a nigger so queer dat he cain't set down an' go to sleep anywhar, any time!"

"You ought to be ashamed to talk about Silver dat way," Skeeter snickered. "All de women folks say he's a puffeckly nice young man. Even my gal, Dazzle Zenor, tol' me he wus a reg'lar dear an' you all know Dazzle. She wus raised on raw meat

an' fed on black gunpowder, an' she's like Esau, de snake eater—she eats 'em alive!"

"You knows Goldie, too," Pap Curtain snarled. "She's my daughter, an' she's married to Hitch Diamond, de Tickfall Tiger prize fighter. Goldie's hard to please when it comes to men. Me an' Hitch don't please her a darn bit at no time; an' yit she's sizzlin' like a sody water founting about dis Silver Tune. All de women is crazy about him."

"Mebbe he deserves all de good recommends," Vinegar Atts remarked. "I kind of imagine he cain't he'p bein' what he is. He come home from college an' got him a job as house boy in de Lanthorn home. Dar is seven Lanthorn gals, an' eve'y one of dem little white gals is as pretty as a Jersey heifer. A cawnfiel' mule skinner wid cockleburs in his wool would git a little ladified wuckin' wid dat outfit of female chillun."

"I ain't in favor of dis here eddication," Enter said. "Me an' Coop wucked hard an' saved a little money to give sis a little learnin'. It wus too late fer us to start; but she met up wid dis here Silver Tune dar an' wants to fetch dat thing into our family. He ain't man enough fer her."

"You cain't pick no flaws in Silver," declared Vinegar. "Excusin' his ladified manners, he's all right."

"Shore!" Enter sneered. "A puffeck fireside companion!"

"You cain't fault him nowhar," Vinegar continued. "He don't drink or smoke or chaw or dip snuff, an' I bet he wouldn't cuss even ef a tarripin' bit his toe off."

"Suttinly," Coop agreed. "He's a househol' hick."

"I don't like dat famby fop kind," Skeeter announced. "When I see him I always wish some fightin' man would come along an' muss up his clothes. I ain't no fightin' man—I'm a bizness man."

"He's gwine to git his clothes mussed," Enter predicted positively. "Me an' Coop is found out dat de Lanthorns ain't at home to-day, an' we crave to go out dar an' gib him de whole wucks. We'll beat him up!"

"Dat's de proper notion," Pap Curtain applauded. "When you finish wid Silver, come back an' tell us whut you done to him."

III

WHEN the two men had walked away, Hitch Diamond chanced to pass the Hen-

scratch, and the Big Four called to him to make them a visit.

It was not often that Hitch had any time for the celebrated quartet. He belonged to the society of the unregenerate in Tickfall, the "rank an' defiled" of the people, as he expressed it; but the prize fighter is ever a popular hero. Whenever Hitch spent a little time with them, the Big Four felt flattered, offered him a big cigar with a gold band, and asked him questions about his ring career.

Hitch was always hard to start. His words were few and laborious. The four sages always waited patiently until he removed the gold band from his cigar and fitted it with great care upon his little finger, where it slipped over the first joint. Then, while he surveyed this trivial adornment with the complacency of a bride holding her wedding ring, they would begin to question him about his fistic affairs, showing the utmost deference to him as a first-class fighting man, gazing at him in mute admiration, or listening with murmurs of applause—"making miration" over his tales.

They got him started on a whale of a story which they had never heard before—how as a boy he had traveled up the Mississippi to the Ohio River, where he had fought rival pugilists upon the tobacco wharf boats, in the days when men battled with bare fists, stripped naked to the waistline. He had reached the most exciting part of his tale when Little Bit came out and announced in a whisper that Silver Tune was in the Henscratch and wanted to see all of the Big Four at one time.

"Tell him to go away an' come back nex' Christmas," Skeeter snapped.

"Don't fix de time so soon," Pap Curtain warned. "We don't want to be interrupted agin by dat nigger dis year. Make it nex' June."

"Go on, Hitch," Vinegar urged.

"He looks kind of excited up, like somepin done happened," Little Bit remarked.

"We don't keer whut happens to Silver," Skeeter said, and then he paused with a look of surprise. He recalled that only a few minutes earlier two men had started after Silver, muttering threats and breathing slaughter. "Hol' on, fellers!" he added. "Dis might be good. Mebbe Tune got beat up, an' wants to show us his wounds."

"All right," Vinegar growled. "Chase him out here. We'll take a look."

They all hoped they would see Silver minus an ear and a handful of teeth; but his appearance was completely disappointing. He was a tall, well built, alert black man, and there was not a mark upon his body or his immaculate dress to indicate that there had been any sort of rumpus.

"Well, whut is it?" Skeeter demanded in an unpleasant voice. "Tell it quick an' git away."

"I'se got two nigger men out at de Lanthon place, locked up in de smoke house," Silver said in an excited tone.

Either because of fright, or because of his speedy journey to the Henscratch, his breath was coming in gasps.

"Whut you want us to do about it—go out an' sing 'em to sleep?" Pap Curtain snarled.

"I hoped you mought come out an' injuce 'em to go away peaceable," Silver said. "Dey come out dar bawlin' me out because I craved to marry deir sister, an' I pussuaded 'em to go out to de smoke house, whar we could talk widout disturbin' nobody. I let 'em go in ahead of me an' slammed de do' an' locked 'em in!"

"Dat was a grand an' noble idear," Figner Bush quacked. "Now you wants us to go out an' turn 'em loose fer you."

"Somepin like dat," Silver said uncertainly. "I don't want to git mixed up in nothin' rough an' messy, an' dey talks like dey's kinder peeed."

"I reckin so," Vinegar Atts agreed. "Ef you turns 'em out an' tries to handle de situation wid a pair of pink gloves, you's apt to git de gloves busted acrost de palm."

"Shore!" Skeeter Butts broke in. "An' now you is down here an' wants to shift de bare-knuckle job of perteckin' you off on us—take us fer a bunch of roughs. Well, I ain't a fightin' man—I's a bizness man."

"It ain't dat," Silver said. "You men is always law an' awder niggers, an' I hoped you would come out an' argufy wid 'em an' overspeak 'em so dat dey will see reason an' git away quiet."

"Well, we will see about it," Vinegar said noncommittally. "Mebbe we kin git aroun' an' cornsider yo' case after while—say some time dis afternoon."

"But you men don't ketch on," Silver gasped. "You don't realize whut a fix I

am in. Here, me, got two niggers locked up in a white folks' smoke house, an' I ain't got no right to keep 'em dar. Dey is usin' scand'lous language about whut dey intend to do when dey gits out. I am in de middle of a bad fix an' I don't want to go back dar alone."

"You bet you don't," Skeeter agreed. "De longer you keeps 'em dar de less you is gwine to want to be alone wid 'em when dey gits out."

"I suttinly craves comp'ny," Silver said. "I knows dem two men. Dey's jes' common black niggerish nigger men, an' dey's mighty apt to—"

"Shore!" Pap interrupted. "Dey's apt to chaw you up an' spit parts of you out all de way back to deir home; but I cain't he'p it."

"De point is dis, Silver," Vinegar exclaimed. "You butted in here jes' when de Tickfall Tiger wus tellin' us about a prize fight he had on a tobacco wharf boat on de Ohio River. Dat ole smoke house is empty except fer dem coons, ain't it?"

"Yes, suh."

"An' de smoke house has a solid cement flo' an' is made out of fireproof brick, ain't it? An' de white folks is smoked meat in dar fer de las' pas' fawty year, ain't dey?"

"Yes, suh."

"Well, I cain't see dat dem men kin do any harm by stayin' dar a little while. In fact, it might cool 'em off, an' dey'll be mo' reasomble when we go out dar to reasom wid 'em. S'pose we leave 'em dar an' let Hitchy finish his story of de fight? Set down an' rest yo' hat. Now, Hitchy, proeed on!"

"I was jes' a young feller in dem days," Hitch continued in his heavy monotone. "I wusn't no older dan dis here Silver Tune, but I reckon I had a diffunt tone to my trumpet. I didn't know much about how mean white folks an' niggers kin be to each other, an' mos' generally is. I didn't hab nobody to back me in dat fight, because I didn't know anybody. We didn't hab no bizness arrangement. De way fightin' wus in dem days, us two niggers would fight, de one whut whipped would pass his hat, an' dem whut seen de fight would chip in whutever dey thought de show wus wuth to 'em. Sometimes we wouldn't git mo'n a dollar or two."

"I remember dem days," Vinegar said.

"Dar wus about a dozen white an' fo' black men see de fight," Hitch went on.

"De niggers had all bet on deir man wid de white people, an' dat fighter didn't las' but jes' one round. I hit him jes' one time, an' he set down an' looked aroun' foolish an' never tried to git up. Den dem fo' nigger men all jumped me at de same time an' tried to beat me up, because dey had los' deir money. Dar warn't no way to git off of dat wharf boat, so I had to wade in an' defend myse'f. I didn't hab to obey no fight rules, an' I had good luck. I hit one on de back of his neck an' kicked de yuther in de stomach; but de yuther two jumped on me, an' we went scrappin' in' an' cussin' an' kickin' an' bitin'. We didn't pass no remarks to each yuther. We jes' howled like dawgs do when dey fights, tryin' to skeer each yuther by de racket we made. Dey wus powerful good scrappers, too. I wasted a lot of punches dat would hab he'ped me a lot, but dem two wus shifty on deir feet an' kep' away. Dey landed some awful bumps on me, too. Den dem two fellers whut I had punched at de offstart got up an' j'ined in. Dey didn't come in close, but dey he'ped to add to my troubles; but I still had luck. I wus lookin' aroun' fer somepin' to fight wid, because de fracas wus too one-sided, an' I needed a weapon; but dar warn't nothin' in de wharf shed but de hogheads of tobacco."

"Dat's right," Vinegar remarked. "I've seen 'em."

"One of dem fellers atter me wus a little runt like Skeeter, whut weighed about eighty pounds. He had a twisted neck, an' helt his head on one side in a funny way. Somehow he got hit in de wind, an' he fell right down at my foots. Dat shows de good Lawd wus on my side. I grabbed dat little runt by his collar an' one arm, an' waved him aroun' an' mowed down two niggers by hittin' 'em wid his legs. Den dey couldn't crowd me so promiscuous, because dey might hit deir friend. Dat little nigger wus shore a handy wepon fer me at a time when I needed him most. I fayed aroun' an' slayed aroun' wid him until I fit my way to de do'. Den I slung him at de crowd an' hit de gangplank an' didn't stop runnin' fer a week."

When the story was finished, the Big Four turned to Silver Tune. He was sitting on the edge of his chair, his fists were closed tight, and his blue-black eyes were glowing with strange interior fires. He was looking at Hitch Diamond in a way that

spoke his admiration like the tones of a trumpet. Then he asked:

"Up to dat time had you ever studied de manly art of self-defense?"

"Had I — which?" Hitch Diamond asked, and his question was like a curse.

"He don't mean no harm, Hitchie," Vinegar Atts hastened to say. "Silver wus borned dat way, an' got ruint a little wuss at college. His brains is mixed. He ought to rub snake oil on his hair, er somepin. Whut he wants to know is, did anybody ever learn you to fight befo' you fit on de boat?"

"I had a few lessons," Hitch replied in a mollified tone. "Vinegar Atts teach me all I knowed at de start off."

"An' now, Silver, we will mosey out to de Lanthorn place an' argufy wid dem niggers dat you done locked up," Vinegar said.

IV

THE four men were quiet as they walked along. They noticed that Silver was subdued and thoughtful, and they observed that Hitch was trying to think—an operation which, with Hitch, was a laborious one. They imagined that Silver was regretting that he had been so rash as to play a mean trick on two men who in the course of events, if his love affair prospered, would become his brothers-in-law. It certainly looked like a tactical error in love's campaign. The four had come out to see what might happen, but none of them was interested in saving Silver from what was coming to him. What Hitch was trying to think about they did not know.

Hitch, with his slow mind, was trying to devise a plan that would bring things to pass, whatever they might be.

When they arrived at the spot, all was quiet within the smoke house; but as soon as the two brothers heard voices without they raised their own in loud and profane protest at their incarceration. The building had no window, merely a door, and was constructed of fireproof brick lined inside with metal. The two men locked up within were almost as closely sealed as if they had been in one of those metal containers in which gasoline is shipped; and the place was as hot as the inside of a Dutch oven.

Silver walked up to the smoke house door and reached into his pocket for the key. Then Hitch revealed what he had been

thinking about. When the key was brought forth, his big hand reached for it. He grabbed it, inserted it in the lock, and opened the door just wide enough to admit one man.

That one man was Silver Tune. Hitch caught him by the scruff of the neck, shoved him forcibly through the opening, and then shut the door and locked it again.

"Lawd, Hitchie!" Vinegar Atts exclaimed. "You done fed little Daniel to de lions!"

But this biblical reference to a historical event was beyond Hitch. It went over his top. He leaned back against the door with an air of ease and remarked:

"I'll stand here an' head off anybody dat escapes out alive!"

"I hope dey can manage to avoid any violence," Skeeter Butts said in an unctuous tone. "No doubt Silver kin submit some highbrow proposal of compromise which dey'll be glad to accept. Dat's whut comes from bein' a scholard!"

"I bet he don't git a chance to waste no breath on dat couple," Vinegar said. "He ain't got no mo' show dan a chicken wid a pair of raccoons."

There was no time for further talk. As far as the men outside could judge, Silver had started to say something, and his voice identified him in the darkness of the windowless room. Then there was the scraping of feet upon the cement floor as the two prospective brothers-in-law moved toward him, after which there came a wild scramble and much profanity.

"Dat sounds to me like somebody done started somepin," Figger Bush quacked.

"I think I'll stay outside until dey break de do' down," Hitch Diamond grinned.

"De do' is comin' down now," Skeeter snickered, as a body hit it violently.

"I'll try to hold it up fer a little while," Hitch said, as he placed his back against it. "I figger it out dat Silver come up dis way jes' now, but it didn't do him much good."

"Lawdymussy!" Vinegar exclaimed, as a solid body collided with the side of the house and all the metal rang with the shock, as if it was being shoved off from the inside. "Somebody got jarred dat time! An' now he has done hit de yuther side! I wish we had a window to see through. Dis here is a real good show, an' us mought as well be blind."

And then pandemonium broke out in

that smoke house. If all three men had had a club in each hand, and had been running from side to side in the building, beating upon the metal which contained them, they could not have hit the walls oftener. If they had been engaged in a contest to ascertain which could make the most noise with his mouth, uttering epithets which are not good form in the best social circles of Tickfall, they could not have been more conversational if they had done nothing else, giving all their time and talent to it.

Again, if all three had been engaged in the task of mopping up the cement floor with a large, heavy object, and had been paid to work fast, there could not have been more scraping of the surface if they were in a race at the task and trying to win a bet. It would have been gorgeous to see. It was edifying and inspiring to hear. It seemed to increase in violence, and it was prolonged far beyond the expectation of the men upon the outside.

Finally Vinegar suggested:

"I reckin you better open up, Hitchie. Ef one of dem niggers gits kilt, de cote-house might ax us 'terrogations."

"All right," Hitch said; "but it has been a good party, an' I'm glad I come."

They opened the door. There were two men who were glad to have them enter, for their intrusion ended the fight; but the Big Four did not see what they were looking for. The man standing up in the middle of the floor was Silver Tune. The other two were leaning against the side of the house, each as far from Silver as the walls would permit.

Silver's coat and shirt were both torn off, one leg of his trousers was gone, and the other was split. His back and chest were bleeding from a dozen welts and bruises, which were swelling and becoming more painful every minute, and blood was streaming from his nose as it streams from the throat of a stuck pig; but he was standing firmly on his feet, in position to fight some more, and he seemed to be debating which cringing man to attack first.

The other two had been kicked and bitten and pummeled and beaten. Their eyes were blinded, their ears were chewed, and their fingers had been mashed by being stepped on as they groveled on the cement floor. Their clothes indicated that each of them had been used as a swab. That smoke house was a place where meat had been smoked and cured for many years,

and all the accumulated smoke and soot that had settled upon the floor and walls had been wiped off. Blood was splashed in drops on the walls, and lay in little pools on the floor.

"My Gawd!" Hitch growled, glaring at Silver Tune. "Whut you been doin' to dese two cullud pussons?"

"I been practicin' on 'em," replied Silver with a pugnacious grin. All the "ladi-fied" had gone out of the tones of his voice, and he spoke with the truculence of a defiant swamp rat. "I learned how to punch de stuffin' out of niggers in de gym at college, an' I done knocked de tar out'n dese here coons. I come back home an' tried to be a cullud gent, but dat's hard fer a nigger to do. De yuther niggers picked on me an' acted like dey had a grouch."

"Dat's right," Vinegar bawled.

"Eve'ybody said I put on a high collar an' got stuck up," Silver went on; "but my collar is tore off now, an' I know some niggers whut's gwine to git deir heads tore off ef dey tries to buzz me any mo'!"

"You cullud brudders want to skidoo?" Hitch asked, as he opened wide the door and looked at the two beaten men.

Enter and Coop arose and limped away. They were whipped.

"Skeeter," Silver said in a harsh, dictatorial tone, "go down to de cabin back of de big house an' fotch me some clothes. Git a move on you now, an' make it snappy! I aims to dress up an' go git Pearlie an' marry her right now. Ef any member of dat fambly objects, Gawd pity 'em!"

For ten minutes Hitch Diamond had been staring at the magnificent young body of Silver Tune. His pugilistic eyes were trained to the estimation of physical power and perfection. He saw before him one of the most excellent fighting machines he had ever beheld. In a great burst of enthusiasm he announced his decision:

"Hol' on, fellows! From dis time on I am dis here nigger man's trainer. I'll make a prize fighter out'n him whut 'll lick eve'y coon of his weight an' size in dis country, an' me an' him will retire in our old ages wuth a millyum dollars!"

He walked over and placed both arms around Silver's bruised body in a bearlike hug.

"I'm shore glad I found you, son," he said.

"Bless Gawd!" Vinegar Atts bawled. "De Tickfall Tiger's done found a cub!"

The Tiger Lily

THE STORY OF A WOMAN WHO FOUND THAT IT MIGHT BE
BETTER TO BE LOVED FOR HERSELF THAN TO BE
LOVED FOR THE BEAUTY OF HER FACE

By J. S. Fletcher

"YOU are wondering what brought me here," Narcissus said across the dining table to a stranger who, he perceived, was taking a thrilling interest in him. "I will tell you. I am looking for a woman."

There was an impressive pause.

"Indeed!" the stranger commented respectfully. "Your wife?"

"She is not my wife," replied Narcissus, "nor, of necessity, is she some other man's. I came here to look for her. I thought she would be here, but I cannot find her. It's very expensive and extremely annoying."

The stranger was more than interested—he was curious.

"Perhaps she *is* here," he suggested gently. "I may have seen her, if you haven't. Could you describe the type of woman to me?"

"Describe her?" said Narcissus, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Certainly! She's the soulless tiger lily type—half fragrant flower, half ravening beast; scented superficialities heaped upon a yawning sepulcher of greed; the canker at the soul of all society; the cancerous growth that seems to be ever on the increase; the vampire woman—" He broke off and leaned forward, his eyes dilating, and fixed them upon a man and woman who had just come into the dining room. "There she is," he whispered. "Look!"

The stranger turned his head and beheld a magnificently beautiful and triumphantly soulless woman, with an unobtrusive and unhappy-looking man.

"At last!" exclaimed Narcissus, keeping his glowing eyes on her. "The very woman I've been trying to run down! I will watch her every movement, listen to

her every word, dog her footsteps, scratch up an acquaintance, wind myself into her confidence, dissect the woman's soul—her mechanism, I mean—to its very depths!"

"Are you a detective hunting down a criminal?" the other man inquired.

"No," said Narcissus. "I'm a dramatist hunting down a temperamental type."

"What a pity," said the visitor, who had a sense of humor, "that I'm *not* an interviewer after all!"

Narcissus colored with vexation. He had been certain that this conversation would meet his eyes next morning in the *Daily Vulture*. He rose with dignity.

"What an intense relief to talk to somebody who doesn't want to make a little money out of one's remarks!" he said.

It was not for nothing that his friends had christened him Narcissus. The first time that he looked into a mirror he had fallen in love with his reflection, and he had never fallen out of love with it since then.

He went into the drawing-room to await the coming of the Tiger Lily, as he called her in his mind, and to alleviate his irritation with a cigar.

He had not very long to wait before she came, drawing in her wake the unobtrusive man. Narcissus laid his head against the oriental cushions of the lounge in a particularly pretty pose, and watched the two under his long lashes.

"He is certainly her husband," commented Narcissus. "He looks so unhappy!"

The unobtrusive man reminded him of the keeper of a first prize exhibit at a dog show. He seemed perpetually conscious of his exhibit, his responsibility toward it, and his own insignificance compared to it.

"I am the keeper," his whole manner expressed. "I am only the keeper; but my duties are not so light."

"Yes, she is certainly his wife," Narcissus said to himself, "because she takes no pains to please him."

She was rather like a tiger lily to look at, too. Her beauty was of the rustling and self-advertising type; her satisfaction in herself was as good as a printed catalogue of her admirers. Her hair was reddish gold, turned back from a round, pale face. Her eyes were amber brown and her mouth was crimson. Narcissus leaned back, and his eyes foraged in her soul. If she was a tiger lily, then he was pulling her petals brutally.

"How she loves herself!" he commented. "How she adores her beauty, her dresses, her ornaments, her dinner! It must be a pleasure to her to blow her nose. A bourgeois act, but it draws attention to the hands, the rings, and the laced handkerchief."

Yes, she was no better than a magnificent pet dog, well combed, well washed, well fed, and with the same conviction that people lived to take her out and put food before her.

His curiosity about her was immense. Did she imagine, then, that she had a soul, or was she content to be no better than a prize exhibit? If the latter, seeing that her feelings and desires were of such paramount importance to her, why did the one need of a soul remain unquestioned? A common type, he repeated to himself, Heaven knows how common, and — how utterly inscrutable!

What was the creature? Was she woman, animal, or devil? Were the rudiments of immorality in her? Was her happiness the uncouth mirth of a mindless thing? Was her sadness the seeking of her nature for a spirit, or a passion of sulkiness, perhaps, because she could not feel? Narcissus would have liked to break her to pieces, as a child breaks a mechanical toy to find out how it goes. He made up his mind to speak to her, question her, cross-examine her, torment her, to find out if she could really feel.

Just then the woman moved to the mantelpiece. Her keeper, as Narcissus called him, followed her, and looked at her with a strange, appealing sadness in his eyes.

"He adores her," thought Narcissus immediately. "Does he know what he's

adoring? Does he adore her because her soullessness has called out an unselfishness in him which a good woman might never have awakened? Or does he adore her because she represents the unattainable to him—because he knows she can never love him?"

The man made a little movement toward her—it might have been to arrange a fold of lace, or to touch her cheek for a moment. He caught his sleeve in a string of jewels that she wore. The string snapped, and the stones fell in a little tinkling shower.

The Tiger Lily burst into a passion. Her eyes flashed, her cheeks flamed, she showed her teeth.

"You stupid creature!" she cried. "You're always doing something abominably clumsy!"

"That proves conclusively that he is her husband," thought Narcissus. "It proves, also, that she has no soul. She shows the utter lack of dignity and self-control of a mere animal."

He crossed the room to where the Tiger Lily and her husband were searching for the jewels on the rug.

"May I be allowed to help?" he said.

The husband was glad to find some one to talk to who would take a more lenient view of his clumsiness. The woman was glad to find some one else on whom to vent her passionate irritation.

"There were thirty amethysts in the chain," she kept on repeating, "and I've only found twenty-eight."

Narcissus was fortunate enough to discover the twenty-ninth; but nobody could find the thirtieth. The Tiger Lily was the first to give up the hunt.

"I shall leave you to it," she said to her husband with vindictiveness, "and you must look till you *do* find it!"

Narcissus and her husband were left searching on the rug. The man gave the dramatist a strange, appealing look out of his grave, tired eyes.

"Heavens!" thought Narcissus. "How she has made him suffer! How she deserves to suffer, too!"

Aloud he said to the man:

"She is very beautiful."

The husband flushed, as if he had been praised himself.

"It was stupid of me to break her chain," he said hurriedly. He looked at Narcissus again. "It is her one passion,

collecting jewels. I have given her most of them." He paused. "But I can't give her as many as I should like."

They continued their search.

"A man," the husband added, "can do so little for a woman. She gives him everything. What can he give her?"

For a moment Narcissus was too much amazed to reply.

"You are tired," he said at length. "Let me go on looking. I won't steal her amethyst," he continued, smiling. "If I have the good luck to find it, I'll bring it back to her."

The woman's husband shook hands with him.

"I should be more than grateful," he said. He took out his card. "We have a suite on the third floor."

By dint of exhaustive searching Narcissus found the amethyst lodged in a crack of the floor. He determined to return it to the Tiger Lily in person.

II

THE next morning Narcissus went up in the lift to the suite of rooms on the third floor. As it happened, the woman's husband was not at home.

"He has gone out," she said, "to see if he can buy another amethyst to match the set."

Narcissus held out the palm of his hand.

"There is no need for that," he said. "I found it."

She pounced at it as a cat pounces at a sparrow.

"Where did you find it?" she cried. She looked as if she could have kissed him, and Narcissus was man enough not to feel displeased. "It was a particularly dark stone. The deeper the color, you know, the more valuable the amethyst. I have some more that I will show you." She went into the next room and came back with a case of jewels in her hand. "Look!" she cried, as she poured them out upon the table.

"They would provide a feast for the whole of London's poor," Narcissus said, observing her, "and they have only bought one piece of womanhood!"

"My husband gave them to me," she replied, smiling.

"You will make him bankrupt," Narcissus warned her.

A look of intense vexation crossed her face.

"What, again? Has he been talking to you?" she exclaimed. "Sometimes he's so bad tempered I was afraid that there was something wrong. It would be too awful. What one goes through!"

"What *he* goes through, and *for* what!"

"I can't help it," said the Tiger Lily, with complacence, "if he's so weak about me. I only admire things in shop windows. I never ask outright for them, and then he goes and brings them home at once."

"Are all these jewels his?"

"Not all," she answered, smiling contentedly.

"Other men's?" Narcissus asked.

"Well, yes—and one man in particular." She sighed briefly. "It was very sad—he died."

"You mean he took his life?" Narcissus asked.

"How did you know?" she asked, with her eyes round.

"Because I know what women like you do to men," he answered, watching her. "You maddened him, took everything from him, gave him nothing back, and ruined him. Then he shot himself."

"You must be very clever," she said with the foolish simplicity of a mindless child, "to know all that! I was very sorry about it; but men are so silly—they get desperate about me, and there's no reason for that."

"None, I agree," Narcissus said.

She looked angry for a moment.

"You're not serious," she said.

"On the contrary, I am. Men get desperate about you, trying to find something—anything—a soul, a heart, in you. They stake their last cent on discovering it. When they learn that there is something so terrible on God's kind earth as a woman who can't feel pity or love, they lose their minds."

She stared at him with her mouth open. He realized that some animal instinct warned her that she ought to be offended.

"Tiger Lily," said Narcissus gently, "there's a question about you that I should like to decide."

She knitted her brows in a frown. She was curious about him, flattered by his curiosity, vexed and completely baffled.

"Yes?" she said. "What?"

"I told you just now," he went on, "that you were incapable of love or pity. I am certain about the pity—I should like to be more sure about the love."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned down her lips.

"*Love?*" she repeated with a note of interrogative contempt.

"Your husband—" Narcissus began.

"Oh, my husband!" she said. "He gives me everything I want. He's very good to me."

"Thank you," Narcissus said, "for your definition of love. You *love* a man for what you get from him?"

"Oh, well," she replied, laughing coquettishly.

Narcissus rose to go. She followed, like an animal.

"But you'll come back?" she asked in her helpless voice. "You'll come back again?"

"Yes, I'll come back," Narcissus told her. "Your mechanism interests me. It's really ludicrously simple, so much so that it seems intricate."

III

NARCISSUS began to go there very often. He was beginning to master the woman's mechanism. Sometimes the Tiger Lily's husband was there, sometimes he was not. When he was there, the three talked on general subjects. When he was not, Narcissus talked to the woman of nothing but herself.

"I often wonder where you'll go when you die," he said. "Heaven is a place for people who have used their brains and souls. Hell is a place for people who have not used them, or have misused them. You couldn't possibly be sent to heaven; but it wouldn't be fair to send you to hell for having failed to use your brain and soul. You can't use what you haven't got. I used to believe in a dogs' heaven. You might go there. No, hardly, because dogs desire to have souls—one can see it in their eyes—and you don't. A soul's the one thing you have no use for, as Americans say. It's very puzzling!"

Narcissus was the one man who had baffled the Tiger Lily. He gave her the impression that he was completely callous to her. His indifference stung her. She told him as much.

"Some day you may thank me," he replied.

"Why should I thank you, or any man, for anything you like to do for me?" she said with a vixenish note in her voice. "I don't ask you to do it."

"Not particularly," he answered, "seeing that your whole personality is a definition of the verb to ask, to beg. You live on other people, their money, their love, their lives, because you have nothing of your own at all. It's not your fault, I suppose; but it's curious that it never occurs to you to be ashamed, or to want to give them something back."

She rose and came toward him, trying to subdue him, with a kind of malevolent passion, to her way of thinking, or not thinking; but she could not speak. She was filled with rage, because she felt suddenly, before Narcissus, that she was ignorant.

"Don't paw me," said Narcissus. "I think you were going to stroke my head, or cuff it—I'm not sure which. I particularly dislike my head being touched."

"You're hurting me!" she almost screamed. "You've no right to. I never have been hurt!"

"Have I the good luck to hurt you?" he said eagerly. "I am always clever, but this is a stroke of genius. What does it feel like to feel pain for the first time in your life?"

Suddenly a burst of anger—was it anger?—came over him, and he seized hold of her.

"You'd like me to kiss you," he said, looking close into her eyes. "Do you know what I should like to do? To prick you with a dagger!"

"You would like to kiss me," she cried, tears of fury in her eyes, "but you're afraid of confessing it!"

"Tears!" exclaimed Narcissus, examining them. "Are they, too, the first of their kind? What extraordinary good luck for me! What a stroke of inspiration! But take them back now. They are easy for you to make, so they will be as easy to take back. Tears are ugly; they inflame the eyes. I can't look; I cannot bear to look at anything unsightly."

He went away. During his absence he thought that he would let the Tiger Lily fall in love with him, would encourage her to do so. He had begun to make her sensible to pain. This was in itself a triumph. Suffering, he said to himself, is the seed of the soul. He had sown the seed himself. Now he would have the inexpressible satisfaction of nursing it through prolonged pain into actual existence.

Besides, he had grown fond of the Tiger

Lily's husband. The poor fellow was unhappy, and Narcissus wanted to do something to help him. He wanted to awaken in his friend's wife the capacity, not for taking, but for giving love. Besides, his vampire woman play would be the rage of London.

The Tiger Lily began to grow thinner. A new look, which was not languor, but a kind of fire, crept into her eyes. Narcissus lost no opportunity of her companionship. He seemed to court it, even to pursue her. With the look of gratification in her eyes, there came a curious approach to wistfulness.

"You are beginning to feel ignorant," he said to her. "What a blessed thing! The consciousness of ignorance is the beginning of all wisdom."

Then he would show her the letters he received, asking for autographs, asking for sittings at a photographer's. He would show her letters from other women, telling him that he was "simply too sweet to look at," and inviting him to lunch. She began to grow a little humble, and she was certainly much thinner. Narcissus told her that it did not suit her. She was a type of splendid flesh, he said. When she lost that, her personality would become a cipher.

One day he went up to the Tiger Lily's flat for tea. Her husband had gone out, and she was alone. Narcissus brought out a letter.

"I have written you this," he said, handing it to her.

She tore the envelope open. Narcissus had composed a love letter to her, couched in burning terms of adoration. Her whole face changed as she read it. Then she got up and came toward him, holding it.

"You really wrote this, meaning it for me?" she said in a whisper, coming toward him.

They were standing by the fireplace. Narcissus snatched the letter from her suddenly, tore it into pieces, and flung them in the grate. Then he watched her carefully.

"Oh!" she cried, kneeling down before the fire, her head down over the bars. "You couldn't be so cruel!"

She raked among the ashes for the scraps.

"Don't be a fool," Narcissus said. "You'll get your fingers black."

Suddenly she gave a cry.

"My head, my hair! What is it? Quick!"

"Heavens!" cried Narcissus. "It's your combs!"

She began to scream horribly.

"My head's on fire! It's burning—burning! Oh, be quick!"

He was spellbound with horror. He even wrung his hands.

Then he remembered to throw a rug over her head. He pressed it down over her head and face, and heard her cries and sobs stifled through the folds, while her hands fought madly at his wrists. His heart beat till he felt strangled, his legs trembled beneath him. At last he took the rug away, staring aghast at her, himself the embodiment of horror.

She put her hands up to her head.

"Oh, oh, it's coming off, it's coming off!" she sobbed like a child. "Look there, look there!"

With indescribable dismay Narcissus saw her hold out her hands full of great bunches of the marvelous hair.

The door opened, and her husband came into the room. She ran toward him, screaming dreadfully.

"I am all *burned!*" she cried. "My beautiful, beautiful hair!"

IV

IT was ten days before Narcissus could persuade himself to call upon the Tiger Lily, to inquire for her in person. He had sent her notes, expressing himself anxious for her recovery from the shock that she had had; and to these she invariably replied that she was not sufficiently recovered to see any one.

At last she wrote that she would "love to see him" if he would only come and *not expect too much*. The last half of the sentence was underlined.

Narcissus trembled when the drawing-room door opened and he heard the Tiger Lily's voice asking him to come in. He felt like a man who enters an operating theater for the first time. A feeling of faintness and distaste stole over him. His voice was weak when he spoke.

The blinds were drawn down in the room, and she sat with her back to the light. She rose, with a kind of tremor expressed in the action. She was wearing a large shady hat. He noticed how beautifully she was dressed, and that she wore more jewels than before.

"You are—better?" Narcissus said in a weak voice. "You are not changed?" he meant to say.

"Quite well," she said, but by her voice he knew that she was changed. Suddenly she burst out: "Why don't you look at me?"

"Look!" he repeated with a voice of fear. "I am looking." He brought his eyes around slowly to her face. There was nothing altered there. "Your hair!" he exclaimed involuntarily. "You have as much as ever. It has grown?"

She laughed mysteriously and bitterly.

"A switch!" he said to himself. Aloud he went on: "Your husband?"

"He is very good to me," she said.

"Still very good to you!" echoed Narcissus.

He scrutinized her closely.

"Why do you wear a hat when you are indoors?"

"Oh, because—because it's becoming," the Tiger Lily said flippantly.

Her hat seemed to fascinate him. He could not remove his eyes from it.

"Take it off," he continued.

"I don't want to," she answered.

"Take it off," he repeated with growing inconsistency.

He made a step toward her. Her eyes met his with an animal's appeal for mercy. She began to remove the hat.

"You are doing your hair differently," he went on. "It is all down over your eyes. It is vulgar, done that way. It spoils you. Put it back!"

"No, no—I like it best this way," she said, retreating from him.

He put his hand out and brushed it back from her brow.

"My God!" he said. "Your face is burned, too!"

He took a step toward the door.

"You said I was exquisite," she cried. "It's not so bad. Look at me once again!"

"In—in a minute," he answered.

"Men loved me for my beauty," she cried. "Won't they ever love me for my face again?"

Narcissus was silent, standing with his back still turned to her. Then they both saw that the door was open, and that the Tiger Lily's husband was standing there, looking at both of them.

She ran to him, putting out her arms.

"Won't anybody love me for my face?" she said.

Neither of the men said anything; but her husband bent and kissed her neck, while she threw her arms about him, sobbing like a little child.

"Wouldn't it do—if some one loved you for yourself?" he said.

Then Narcissus shut the door and went away very softly.

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

HERE in the morning of the spring
I go, distract with hankering.

My feet have need of loamy reaches,
They yearn to dance down curving beaches
Where jolly, little waves dash in
And lave them from their worldly sin.

My eyes have need of new-born gleams
Of delicate, fresh color schemes,
Puffy, white clouds in wide, blue spaces
And sun-warmed, growing garden places.

My ears have need for clear, soft notes
From musical, pulsing, song-filled throats
They would hear the secrets the four winds tell
And rest in the hush of some magical dell.

My mouth has need for lusciousness
Succulent fruits, whose juices press,
Crisply tender, flavory things—
Gifts from the gods of eternal springs.

Here in the morning of the spring
I go, distract with hankering.

Katherine Sinclair

Brother Bill

A STORY OF RIVERBANK, TELLING HOW THE WIDOW BRANCH
DEALT WITH THE INSIDIOUS CONSPIRACY LAUNCHED
AGAINST HER BY THREE DESIGNING MEN

By Ellis Parker Butler

THE great river, in falling, had left a row of shanty boats stranded in the mud below the railroad embankment in front of the town; but this caused no consternation, because it was just what the owners of the boats desired. When their floating homes were firmly embedded in the mud, even the town marshal could not expect them to move on.

Once more nature had been good to them. The argument that they could not venture upon the bosom of the ripsnorting Mississippi while the June rise made it a raging torrent had seemed valid to the marshal, and now the rapid fall of the waters had sealed them in for another summer. Beyond the shanty boats fifty yards of slimy mud that would eventually dry and surface-crack now spoke for itself. The marshal went back uptown.

Rodge Tuck and One-Eye Hopper sat on the forward deck of their boat and watched the back of the marshal disappear down the railroad track.

"Law can't lick nature," Rodge said philosophically. "He give one look at the mud, and he knew what was what. He never hardly cussed us at all."

"Not so it peeled any skin off us," said One-Eye. "He ain't much of a cuss, anyway. Look at who's here!"

Across the track was a section tool shed, and from behind this there came cautiously a man who was evidently one of those ceaseless wanderers who see the world while carefully avoiding work in any form. He watched the marshal until that dignitary had totally disappeared, and then crossed the track and smiled at Rodge and One-Eye in a manner meant to be ingratiating.

"Hello, boss!" he said. "How about an eat?"

Rodge waved his brown and sinewy hand indolently.

"Drift by! Drift by!" he said.

Instead of drifting the man came to their side of the track and widened his smile.

"Well, strike me down if it ain't my old pal One-Eye!" he declared. "One-Eye as ever is, or I'm a loon! Well, you old snoozer—a boat and a clean shirt and everything! Just look at that now!"

"You wouldn't like it here, Fat," One-Eye replied promptly. "It's a hard life, this is. We got to fish, fish, fish, from morning to night, rowing a boat around and—"

"Scooping for mussels," said Rodge. "Dredging for mussels until your arms break off."

"And never moving on to anywhere," said One-Eye. "Just staying right here in one place. You wouldn't like it. Well, it's been good to see you again. So long! Good luck!"

The wanderer whom he had called Fat put his bundle down and sat beside it. From where he sat he could see into the shanty boat, and the eight small catfish that lay on the bench, skinned and cleaned and floured, ready for the pan, appealed to the most important of his senses. He had not eaten a fried catfish for months.

"How you been all this while?" he asked in a most friendly tone. "You look fine."

"Anyway," said One-Eye, "we've only got two bunks, and there's no room for another."

Before their visitor could ignore this statement of fact, as he fully intended doing, Rodge Tuck raised a forefinger and wiggled it at his partner, indicating that he wished him to enter the shanty boat for a private conference. One-Eye followed him inside, and Rodge closed the door.

"Say," he began, without other preliminaries, "how'd he do for Bill?"

"What Bill?" asked One-Eye.

"Brother Bill," said Rodge. "He's the shape of him."

One-Eye leaned against the bench and considered this.

"We'd have to feed him," he said, "and he's a whale when it comes to feed."

"There's no end of carp," Rodge said. "He looks as if he'd eat carp; but we wouldn't feed him—she'd feed him. Maybe we'd feed him to-night, and give him a breakfast to-morrow, and then he'd be off our hands; and we'd make him divide up half and half. That would be the bargain—half and half, or we'd give the whole thing away!"

"It won't work," One-Eye objected. "She'll ask him things, and he won't know them. He'll give himself away the first question she asks him."

"No, he won't," said Rodge. "I'll tell you why—amnesia."

"What's that? What's amnesia?"
It's a kind of disease, and you forget everything that happened. You forget your name and who you are and everything, and then suddenly it all comes back to you," Rodge explained. "That's what happened to this Bill out there—he's been amnesia. He went amnesia and stayed that way until all at once he remembered that his name was Bill Tuck, and that he used to live in a place named Riverbank. So he come along to here, tramping it, and he run into us—by good luck, One-Eye. He don't remember anything but his name, and that Riverbank was where he lived. The rest has got to come back to him gradual-bit by bit."

"He ought to remember more than that," One-Eye suggested. "Your sister Josie is bright, and a name and the name of a town ain't much. He ought to remember a dog or a cat or something—something she would know about, and he would know about, but nobody else would know about."

"I don't know that there is anything he knows about, and she knows about, and I don't know about," said Rodge doubtfully; "but that don't matter so much. She's eager to see Bill again. Bill was her pet brother, and she'll spill money on him, One-Eye."

"We could try it," One-Eye admitted. "If she finds out he's a fake, we won't be

any worse off than before. He lied to us, that's all."

When they went out and proposed the plan to the fat man on the embankment, he readily agreed to be any one's brother. He would have agreed to be a sister to Rodge, at least until after the eight catfish were fried and eaten; and when he was told the details of the Widow Branch's worldly state he was more than eager.

"Five hundred chickens!" he said joyfully. "That's one a day for a year, and a lot over!"

"And more being hatched all the while," Rodge reminded him. "You can eat them as fast as they're being hatched. You'll have so much chicken stew you'll bust."

"You can't bust me with chicken stew," said the newly instituted victim of amnesia. "I swell, but I don't bust. What did you say my name was?"

"Bill Tuck," said Rodge; "and this town is Riverbank. You were born here."

"And she's my sister, and you're my brother?"

"Yes, and I recognized you the minute I set eyes on you," said Rodge. "I ran up to you as you came tramping along, and I grabbed you and cried: 'Bill! Dear old Bill!'"

"And I said 'Dear old—' What did you say your name was?"

"No, you didn't say anything. You didn't remember my name. Amnesia was ailing you. You sobbed out: 'Brother!'"

"And kissed you," suggested the newly made brother Bill.

"No," said One-Eye after a critical look at Rodge Tuck. "You didn't kiss him. There ain't no woman would believe you kissed him—not with that face he's got!"

The newcomer agreed to the plan in all its details, and with an eagerness that should have aroused the suspicions of the two owners of the shanty boat—and would have aroused them, had they not been so much interested in the scheme itself. As a conspirator, Henry Prenk had no hesitation in entering into an agreement to deceive a widow, get money from her, and divide it with Rodge Tuck and One-Eye Hopper; but this was not because he was an extraordinarily conscienceless man—which he was not. It was because he looked no further ahead than the eight small catfish, four of which he meant to have for supper. He fully intended to slip away after dark.

However, when Rodge Tuck and One-Eye Hopper got into a dispute over which of them should cook the pancakes in the morning, Mr. Prenk decided to be the Widow Branch's long lost brother Bill until after breakfast, at least. Thus it was that the hour of 9 A.M. saw Rodge Tuck and One-Eye Hopper piloting Mr. Prenk up the River Road to where Mrs. Josie Branch's nice little farm lay on a fertile hillside.

"Don't you be too eager," Rodge Tuck admonished him. "You remember to forget. This amnesia has got you, and it has got you mighty bad. Don't you go and rush up to Josie and yell: 'Josie! Josie! My long lost sister!' or anything like that. Stand and look at her, and put a hand to your fevered brow and say: 'Is this Josie? Can this be Josie?'"

"How does he know who Josie is?" One-Eye wanted to know.

"Drat it, he don't!" said Rodge.

"So you don't want to say anything, Henry," said One-Eye.

"Are you going to call him Henry?" asked Rodge. "If you are, we might as well go back now."

"Why shouldn't I call him Henry?" demanded One-Eye. "He had to be something when he didn't know he was Bill, didn't he?"

"How did you know his name was Henry, if you're so smart?" asked Rodge. "He came to the shanty boat and said his name was Bill, didn't he? Who told you his name was Henry?"

One-Eye stopped where he was.

"All right!" he said. "You go ahead and have it your own way, and see where you get to. Every time you open your mouth you put your foot in it up to the knee. If you asked a man with some brains what to do, I'd tell you. It would be plain and simple, and a story anybody could believe."

"What like?" Rodge asked.

"The plain truth," said One-Eye. "You and me was sitting on the deck of the shanty boat when the marshal came down and looked at the mud, and went away again; and out from behind the red tool shed stepped this man I'd tramped all over the United States with and knew by the name of Henry Prenk. So I says to you: 'Hell! There's Henry Prenk, and I bet he comes and squats on us for the rest of the summer. Devil help us if he does, for

he's the biggest loafer and greedy-gut in America, bar none.' At that you jumped up and said: 'Prenk? Prenk? That's no Henry Prenk—that's my long lost brother Bill!' Then you rush up the bank and grab him by the hand. 'Bill!' you says. 'Don't you know me? Don't you know Rodge?' And Henry puts his hand to his brow and says: 'Rodge? Rodge? The name is faintly familiar to me; say it again.' And there you are, all open and above board, and if Josie asks me what I know about Bill when he was Henry Prenk, I can tell her."

"Not everything," said Mr. Prenk uneasily.

"Everything!" insisted One-Eye. "You had amnesia and didn't know any better."

"You go light on what you tell her, One-Eye," Rodge said. "You've got to remember that Josie is a respectable woman, and a mighty little might turn her against her dear brother Bill. His looks is going to be a shock to Josie. He's changed—terribly."

II

THE house of Mrs. Josie Branch, widow, born Tuck, was a neat little dwelling with roses twining the porch. It stood near the road, and behind it were the barn, the pig pen, and the chicken houses with their yard.

Mrs. Branch was in the chicken yard, scattering grain from an old tin dish pan, her face hidden in a pink gingham sunbonnet. What the newly elected brother Bill could see of her, however, made him feel that this adventure might not be such a bad thing after all. All the visible portions of Mrs. Branch suggested competent placidity. She did not scatter the grain nervously or stingily. Her plump hand grasped all the grain it could hold and threw it hospitably. From her plumply rounded shoulders to her trim ankles, her ampleness suggested ease and plenty.

Even when she turned her head and saw the spurious brother Bill, her gaze was calm; but when she turned it a little more, and saw her brother Roger and One-Eye Hopper, a look of suspicion came into her eyes.

"Well, what foolishness are you trying this time?" she asked sharply. "You got another husband for me?"

The question referred to one of Roger's mistakes. He had, with entirely too much

enthusiasm, introduced One-Eye Hopper as a gentleman who would make a good second husband for Josie.

"There you go!" said Rodge. "Always bringing up bygones and slinging them at a feller! A man can't open his head before you snap it off. Always suspecting a man! No, I ain't got no husband for you; but that's the way you are. A man tries to do you a favor, and—"

One-Eye jabbed him with an elbow.

"Not that we're trying to do you a favor this time," One-Eye said placatingly. "This time we haven't got no husband for you—not at all."

"By no means," agreed Rodge, changing his tone entirely. "You couldn't marry this one if you wanted to."

"I wouldn't want to," said Josie, looking at Mr. Prenk again. "I can't think of anybody I'd less want to."

Rodge turned to Mr. Prenk.

"There!" he said, with almost too evidently assumed pleasure. "She feels it, too. As soon as she sets eyes on you, she feels the blood tie. I told you she would. She's sensitive, Josie is."

Mrs. Branch tossed the last of the grain out of the pan and came out of the chicken yard. She snapped the padlock into the staple in a way that almost had a meaning.

"Wimmin is more sensitive than way than men," said One-Eye approvingly. "They're tuned delicater. She felt right away that he was her brother Bill."

"Who was my brother Bill?" demanded Mrs. Branch. "What you talking about?"

"Hen Prenk here," said One-Eye, indicating that person, who shifted his weight from one foot to the other, smiled uncertainly, and coughed gently behind his hand. "The minute you saw him, you felt he was your brother Bill."

"Our brother Bill," said Mr. Tuck. "I felt the same way myself when I set eyes on him. 'One-Eye,' I says, 'that's brother Bill!' Did I or did I not, or am I a liar?"

"Yes," said One-Eye.

"Our poor, long lost brother Bill come back to us, Josie," said Rodge. "After long years," he added.

Mrs. Branch looked at Henry Prenk with new interest. She took two steps forward and looked up into his face. She had, indeed, constantly worried over the disappearance of her brother William, who had run away from home, never to be

heard of again. Not a letter, not a message, not a word had ever come from him.

She studied the face of Henry Prenk. She tried to see in it the face of the brother whom she had so sincerely mourned. The years, of course, would have changed him.

"He's got amnesia," One-Eye said. "Just after he ran away from home he got a knock on the head and forgot everything, even his name. That's so, ain't it, Hen?"

"Yes," said Mr. Prenk, blushing slightly as he looked into Mrs. Branch's eyes.

"And he's had it all these years," said Rodge Tuck. "Nothing but amnesia, amnesia, amnesia all the time. Tramping around—just a poor, miserable tramp, kicked around everywhere; but all the time he had a sort of feeling he wasn't who he was. You did, didn't you, Bill?"

"Yes," Mr. Prenk said again.

"And then it sort of come back to you that your name was Bill, and that Riverbank was where you was from, didn't it?"

"It was a sort of beginning of a busting up of his amnesia," said One-Eye quickly. "That's how the cure starts. You start to remember, and then you remember more and more. As soon as he saw Rodge, he said 'Rodge!'"

"Right off the reel," said Rodge. "And I said: 'Bill!' I said, 'One-Eye, it's dear old Bill!' Didn't I, One-Eye? I recognized him instantaneously. 'That's Bill, or I'm a liar,' I says. So we took him in and we fed him; and tell her what you said, Bill."

Mr. Prenk coughed gently again.

"What did I say, Rodge?" he asked. "I said a lot of things."

"About her, I mean," said Rodge. "After we had talked awhile, Bill, didn't you say, of a sudden: 'Bill, things is beginning to come back to me. Didn't I have a sister I loved better than life? Didn't I have a sweet and gentle sister?' You said that, Bill?"

"Yes," said Henry Prenk. "It came back to me like through a haze. 'Bill,' I said right out of a clear sky, 'didn't I have a sister Susie?'"

"Josie," Mr. Tuck corrected quickly. "You said Josie."

"Josie, yes," agreed Mr. Prenk. "The amnesia gets working in me, and I sort of forget now and again. Josie was what I said, Rodge."

"So there you are," said Mr. Tuck. "Here's dear old Bill back again, Josie,

and we've got to do what we can for the poor old amnesiaed feller. We must try to fetch his brain around so it's sound and solid once more. You can see he's Bill, can't you, Josie?"

It was an anxious moment. Mr. Prenk put his hands into his pockets and took them out again. He felt the stubble of beard on his chin and shifted from one foot to the other, but he could not meet Josie Branch's eyes. The three conspirators awaited the verdict.

"Amnesia is a terrible disease," said Josie at last. "I've read story tales about it, and it's a dreadful thing to have. Can't you remember hardly anything at all, Bill?"

"No, ma'am," said Mr. Prenk.

"Don't you remember a dog you had named Bish?"

"No, you don't, Bill," said Rodge hastily, "because you didn't have any dog named Bish. You don't want to ask the poor feller false questions like that, Josie. It's the worst thing you can do. The way his brain is now, he's just as like to try to remember whatever you say he ought to as not, and the first thing you know you'll have his poor brain all muddled up, and we'll never get him well again."

"But you do remember how hard you used to work," said Josie to Mr. Prenk. "You remember how you were at it from morning till night, weeding the garden, feeding the chickens, plowing the lot, chopping wood, always busy and hustling, while Rodge loafed on his back or went off fishing in the slough—you remember that, don't you?"

Mr. Prenk cast a startled glance of query at Rodge Tuck.

"Of course you do," said Rodge. "Didn't you say to me the minute you set eyes on me, 'If it ain't old Rodge, the loafer that used to let me do all the work?'"

"Maybe you've forgot you said it, Bill," said One-Eye. "The amnesia may be boiling up in you."

"I can tell whether he's Bill," said Mrs. Branch, pushing back her sunbonnet and letting them see a smile that twitched at the corners of her mouth. "Amnesia or no amnesia, Bill was fonder of work than of anything else. You often said what a fool for work he was, Rodge. If this is Bill, I can cure his amnesia."

"How?" asked One-Eye uneasily.

"The way they do in the story tales,"

explained Mrs. Branch. "I'll try names on him until he remembers them and joins them on to other things to remember. I'll try him with the kinds of food Bill used to be most fond of, and they'll remind him of the old home."

"That's a good idea," said Mr. Prenk. "Food always sets my brain to remembering things. The better the food, the better I remember. The more food I get, the more I remember. You ought to have been a doctor, Josie!"

"Don't you call me Josie, you big—" Mrs. Branch began, but she stopped short. "Well, maybe you'd better, Bill," she said in a pleasanter tone. "We've got to use all the old names and words and ways, if I'm to get this amnesia out of your system. Josie I am, and Josie you may call me."

"It's a touching sight, Rodge," One-Eye said. "I never was so close to tears in my life—a loving brother and sister united once again!"

"And especially work," said Mrs. Branch.

"What?" anxiously asked Mr. Prenk. "What did you say?"

"I said work—especially work," said Mrs. Branch. "We've got to remind you of all your old ways and habits, and especially work—the kinds of work you were so strong at in the good old days."

"I wouldn't work him too hard right off," said Rodge, seeing the look of panic that crossed Henry Prenk's face. "You've got to remember that old Bill is enfeebled in body, and any heavy strain might be too much for him."

"You've got to remember," said One-Eye earnestly, "that for a good many years he ain't done no work—not a lick of it. He's got out of the habit. I'd try him with food first—good, tasty food."

"I sort of feel that food will fetch back my memory quicker than work will," agreed Henry Prenk. "Work always confuses up my intellect."

"I won't overwork you—not at first," said Mrs. Branch dryly. "I can see that; but if I'm going to feed a big hulk of a man stewed chicken, and apple pie, and mashed potatoes, and baked beans with nice, thick hunks of pork in them, he's got to do some work. I guess the work he does won't hurt him. I've been doing all there was to do without help. You can sleep in the barn, Bill."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mr. Prenk immediately, for the menu she had mentioned had a strong appeal for him. "I'll sleep anywhere, any time."

"And I do hope," said Mrs. Branch, "you'll turn out to be my brother Bill. It would be a load off my mind. You don't look much like him now. He never would have got into the state of filth you're in; but maybe amnesia works that way. The first thing is to clean you up and get you looking more like a man and less like a hog."

"We're ashamed of you, Bill," said Rodge. "We forgive you, because we know that amnesia done it; but we hope you'll be different from now on. You can see how neat and clean Josie likes things to be."

The thought in Mr. Tuck's mind was that his prosperous sister was about to begin the good work of giving money to the recovered Bill; but in this he was mistaken. She did bid Bill to wait, and she did go into the house; but when she came out again she had in her hand not her purse, but a cake of brown laundry soap.

"Now, it's a nice warm day," she said cheerfully. "You can go down to some sandy place on the river and give yourself a good bath and wash your clothes and lay them in the sun until they dry. Soap's cheap, and I've got my work to do. When you're more like a human being and less like a tramp, Bill, you can come back up and I'll have dinner ready for you. You'd like chicken, wouldn't you?"

"We'll all come back," said Rodge eagerly. "It'll be a reunion of the family."

"Nobody will come back but Bill," said Mrs. Branch. "I couldn't bear to have anybody listen to his sad struggles while his poor amnesia-sick brain tries to remember the dear dead days. And," she added, "I've still got the shotgun loaded—and always will have."

Mr. Prenk, holding the cake of soap as if it was a bird bath filled with precious jewels, went down the path, accompanied by Rodge Tuck and One-Eye Hopper.

At the gate they held a rather spirited conversation. Mr. Prenk said that he was willing to give up the job right there and throw the cake of soap as far as he could throw it. One-Eye Hopper said he couldn't see much in the business himself; but Rodge Tuck declared that it had all worked out much better than he had expected.

"What's a bath?" he asked. "You'd take one some time this summer, anyway, Henry, and you might as well take it now. You touched her heart, you did. She said chicken stew right off, and she never did say chicken stew to me. I'll bet there'll be dumplings in it!"

"She said work, too," objected Mr. Prenk.

"Woman's talk!" scoffed Mr. Tuck. "The females has got to show off. Work! Can she make you work if you don't want to?"

"Nobody has ever made me work, whether I wanted to or not," boasted Mr. Prenk.

It was finally agreed that he would stay until after dinner at least. Then, if he found being brother Bill too strenuous, he could quit.

"You watch!" said Mr. Tuck hopefully. "Josie will begin giving you money before you know it. She's generous that way; she gave me money until we had a quarrel one day."

"What did you quarrel about?" asked Mr. Prenk suspiciously.

"Politics," said Mr. Tuck, but this was not true. However, he did not think it wise to tell Mr. Prenk just then that Josie had ceased being liberal only because he refused to work, and Mr. Prenk allowed himself to be persuaded to proceed to the river where, in a nook sheltered by willows, the trio washed his inner and outer garments and dried them and in good time for the noon dinner Mr. Prenk reappeared at the farm.

"Move that log a bit closer to the wood pile, Bill," Josie suggested. "You might stumble on it when you're doing the evening chores."

Upset by this frank mention of work, Mr. Prenk heaved the heavy timber as if it had been a stick of kindling wood.

"Strong as ever!" Josie remarked admiringly.

When he stepped upon the porch, the delicious odor of stewing chicken issued from the kitchen. Mrs. Branch handed him a bowl of hot water, her late husband's razor, and a small mirror. It was a clean and shaven brother Bill who was finally admitted to the kitchen to have chicken breast and leg, dumplings, mashed potatoes, and gravy heaped on his plate. Mrs. Branch stood and watched him eat.

"Bill," she asked him, "does the name

of Tige bring anything back to your mind?"

Mr. Prenk held his fork suspended in the air while he looked up at Josie. Tige, he considered, must have been a dog. Tige could be nothing but a dog. Mrs. Branch's Tige, however, had been a canary—a good singer but striped.

"I remember a dog, once, named Tige," he began; but as Josie's clear eyes rested on his face he felt the color rising to his forehead.

He let his eyes fall, and when he looked up again he was not afraid to meet her eyes. In fact, he grinned at her quite frankly.

"Ain't you ashamed of yourself?" demanded Mrs. Branch, but not unkindly. "A big strong man like you trying to deceive a helpless woman!"

"For a feed like this," said Henry Prenk, "I'd have amnesia every day in the week!"

III

FROM time to time, as the early summer passed, Mr. Tuck and One-Eye Hopper went up to the farm to see how brother Bill's cure was progressing; but Josie guarded her patient jealously.

"No," she would say, "you can't see Bill. Just the mention of you excites him and sets him back. He's got to have calm and quiet—that's the best cure for amnesia that I've heard tell of."

"Is his memory coming back to him?"

"You'd be surprised," Mrs. Branch might say, or, "You wouldn't believe what he remembers!"

From a distance they sometimes saw brother Bill at work. He did not, to tell the truth, work with an energy that would have caused any one amazement. If he crossed the little farm from one part to another, he paused often to look out upon the river, even leaning against a tree or sitting on a stump to enjoy the view at greater ease; but Rodge and One-Eye did not often walk so far up the river as the farm, the distance being considerable and the road hot.

But one bright September evening the amnesia victim himself walked down the track to where the shanty boat still rested in the mud. He eased himself down the railway embankment to where the two planks led up to the deck of the boat. As his foot reached the deck, Rodge Tuck

turned toward him from where he was frying catfish on the sheet iron stove. One-Eye sat on the rear deck, looking out at the river and smoking his pipe.

"Now look who's here!" exclaimed Rodge. "One-Eye, here's dear old brother Bill come to see us!"

One-Eye came to the door.

"If we'd knowed you was coming, Bill," he said, "we'd have skinned a couple more catfish. You cer'nly do look fine, Bill!"

"And how's it working out?" asked Rodge, who, like One-Eye, had noted that the visitor's appearance was greatly changed, and for the better.

"Just fine!" said their visitor. "Just fine! Josie sent me down—"

"And how's the amnesia?" inquired Rodge. "Is it gettin' cured up all nice and pleasant?"

"It's cured, Rodge," said Henry Prenk. "Not a sign of it left in me. I can remember every little thing—everything that ever happened to me—as clear as a whistle. She's wonderful, Josie is! You don't half appreciate Josie, Rodge. If she was my sister—"

"She is," Rodge reminded him.

"Pshaw, no!" said Henry Prenk. "She cured that hallucination out of me in no time. That was just one of the ways amnesia worked on me, Rodge; but that's all cleared up now. I'm Henry Prenk."

"Henry Prenk?"

"Yes, sir! That amnesia that made me think I was Bill Tuck is all gone, and a mighty good thing, too. It's terrible when a man don't know who he is and thinks he may be somebody else—terrible!"

"Great cats!" exclaimed Rodge Tuck. "You didn't let her prove to you that you was Henry Prenk, did you?"

"Yes, she did!" declared Mr. Prenk with most disconcerting happiness. "She did so, Rodge; and that reminds me what I came for. Josie sent me. She sent—"

He dug into the pocket of the coat of the brand-new suit he was wearing, and found two small squares of paper. He handed one to Rodge Tuck and one to One-Eye Hopper.

"Some of our wedding cake," he said. "Brother Roger," he added, as if an afterthought.

For a moment Rodge stared at the small square parcel in his hand, and then he expressed his sentiments.

"Amnesia the devil!" he said bitterly.

The Pretherau Sapphire

AFTER ALL, IT WAS NOT TRUE THAT THE "YANKEE HOOD-LUMS" STOLE THE FAMILY HEIRLOOMS FROM THE OLD MANSION IN SOUTH CAROLINA

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

THE gentle old prestidigitator beamed over the applause of his small audience as he went through his bag of tricks. They were neither new nor startling, but they were done with dexterity and were deceptive to the eye.

In his broken English he asked if any of the gentlemen cared to light a cigar, and then drew from his mouth a slender candle a foot long, lighted at the end. He chewed innumerable pieces of tissue paper, opened his mouth wide and fanned it, and out came tiny dry bits falling about him like snow. Of course there had to be the trick of putting a handkerchief up his sleeve and demonstrating astonishment as a rather limp pigeon fluttered out in its place.

Finally he asked for a ring, and the hostess, Lisa Davenport, gave him hers—which, after several false trails, was discovered inside of an Irish potato.

"I hope you weren't dreadfully bored?" Mrs. Davenport asked her guests after old Gascon was gone. "The poor old Frenchman is a sort of institution in our neighborhood. He won't accept charity, and it's the joy of his life to put on that dress suit of the early eighties and give his 'evening's select entertainment.' It's about all he has to live on, I'm afraid. Next week there'll be so many people here that I thought it would be simpler to have him while there's just our bunch."

"I think it was loads of fun," said Marta Fields loyally. "Anybody else yearning for a late paddle under the live oaks?"

Talbot Pretherau gave a smiling shake of the head.

"Pitch black night, Marta. It would be like paddling on the tarn that the House of Usher fell into."

"You're no fun since you became en-

gaged, Tal. You're too moon-struck to see the stars!"

But another man thought it would be an adventure to skim in a canoe under the giant trees, and the two went out together in the darkness.

The veils of gray moss that festooned every limb of the live oaks had given Mrs. Davenport's house its name. Gray Oaks was a country place not far from Charleston which had belonged to the Pretherau family for generations. After her husband's death, Lisa's mother had made a brave attempt to hold it by taking "paying guests" during the hunting season. One of the men who came to hunt had fallen as irrevocably in love with Lisa, who was making her début that winter, as she had with him.

After their marriage he bought Gray Oaks at a price to make Mrs. Pretherau comfortable for the rest of her life, and began the task of retrieving the decay and dinginess into which it had fallen indoors, restoring it without changing it, so far as was possible. Out of doors the unchecked growth had added a wildness to its beauty. The gardens were not nearly so extensive as those at the Middleton place, not far distant, nor were there many japonicas; but the azaleas were superb, the live oaks were enormous, and the Davenports were firmly convinced that their crescent Brown Moon Pond, with the water coffee colored from the cypress trees and the banks a blur of color from azaleas in every shade of flame, scarlet, and orange, was the most magically lovely spot in the world.

They always came from their home in Connecticut for a month or more in spring, when the azaleas were in bloom, and

Christmas and the hunting season brought them and their friends to Gray Oaks.

A house party was in order for the following week, but for their first week the only guests were Marta Fields, two men who were especial chums of Peter's, and Lisa's favorite kinsman, Talbot Pretherau.

Davenport was still glancing over the papers when Marta came back.

" Didn't like to go to bed until I knew whether I'd have to drag the pond for you two."

" We didn't go on the pond—it was as black as tar. I said that the mocking birds always sing at night, and we waited around awhile to hear them, but of course they wouldn't give a single chirp. Well, I'm off to bed!"

When Peter went to his room, he found Lisa waiting for him.

" There's bad trouble, Peter!" she said.

" Trouble? What in the world?"

She held out a ring on the palm of her hand. Her eyes were dark with perplexity.

" This isn't mine. This is a fake. Worse than that, faked on purpose!"

Lisa's ring was an old-fashioned miniature ring of pale gold, with a tiny oval portrait painted on ivory and encircled with small pearls, yellowed with age.

At first glance any one might have thought the rings identical, but the substitute was an inexpensive mourning ring of a later period, with an oval picture in porcelain, surrounded by tiny raised dots which resembled a pearl setting.

" You see, I slipped it on without looking at it. I always have the lights dim to help out Gascon; but when I took off the ring to-night I saw that an imitation had been substituted."

" But who on earth—" began her husband in deep perplexity. " You don't suppose old Gascon has become so down and out that he'd steal from us? Why, you're his best friend. Why should he steal when we've tried every way to give without hurting his pride? And what would he do with your great-great-grandmother's miniature?"

" It isn't Gascon," Lisa answered unhappily. " I've known him too long. The butler is new, but he seems a trustworthy man. Wasn't it he who brought in the potato?"

" I'll interview Aaron before he's ten minutes older," replied her husband.

At the door he turned with a laugh, be-

cause his wife had said, as he had absolutely known she would say:

" Don't be too hard on Aaron, Peter. Even if he took it, it was just as a child or a magpie takes a trinket. He couldn't possibly have any use for it."

As his wife was born a South Carolinian, and he a Connecticut Yankee, it was an inherent part of her upbringing that she "understood negroes" in a way that was constitutionally impossible to her husband. Now she ran to him with one of her swift, pretty impulses and kissed him.

" I do so adore you, Peter! Instead of scolding me for turning over my pet ring to poor old Gascon, you go methodically to work to get it back for me. She's such a nice slim-throated ancestor, and besides, she's the only proof left of the Pretherau sapphire."

Around the aristocratic throat in the miniature there was a tiny gold chain, with a sapphire pendant suspended from it. Small as the miniature was, the artist had taken meticulous care with the pendant, and it still showed the deep blue of the sapphire, while a magnifying glass gave a suggestion of a curious yellowish setting.

Now Lisa Davenport, born Pretherau, had been married to Peter for eleven happy years, and naturally most of her interests and intimacies were in Connecticut. Her children had been born there, her closest ties were there, and she always spoke of it as "home"—with one exception. Let the subject of the Pretherau sapphire come up, Lisa's blue eyes would widen and darken and her chin would lift as she told the story of the lost jewel.

It appeared that toward the close of the Civil War, Gray Oaks had been "infested with Yankees"—she always said "infested" in that particular connection—and that they had shown great discrimination in their loot. They had taken the Pretherau sapphire and a silver mug embossed in cherubs with a handle made of folded wings—a piece of seventeenth century workmanship which the first Pretherau who came to South Carolina had brought over with him.

The Pretheraus had been forced to part with silver and jewelry in the lean years of the reconstruction, so that the miniature ring was the only thing of any importance that had come to Lisa by inheritance. Peter was much perturbed at its loss, knowing how she valued it. He went to that

part of the rear floor where the house servants slept. It occurred to him distastefully that the only other time it had been necessary to wake up the servants was the night when small Peter had been ill—and how concerned they had been!

He knocked at Aaron's door. Only a snore greeted him, but such a rousing snore that it sounded as if pretended. He opened the door and snapped on the light, but Aaron slept noisily on, his big body as relaxed as a child's.

"Somehow I don't believe he did it," muttered Davenport; "but I suppose I'll have to investigate."

He shook Aaron, he absolutely kneaded him before he could arouse him. Then the man saw it was the master of the house, and struggled to a sitting position as he asked:

"Please, sah, lemme wash a leetle of dis sleep outa mah eyes." He plunged his face in a basin of cold water and inquired respectfully: "You needin' me, sah?"

Davenport could not have been the successful lawyer that he was if he had not been quick to gain insight into the character of a witness. His voice became entirely friendly, asking help:

"Aaron, your mistress lost a ring tonight that she puts great store by, and I want you to help me find it. It was that ring in the potato. Somehow another ring was exchanged for hers. Can you remember who gave you the potato? You brought it in to Gascon covered with a napkin, you remember, with the ring in the salt cellar."

"Lemme study, sah. Miss Marta she was a helpin' po' ole man Gascon. She an' Mr. Talbot went out an' got de tater an' de napkin an' de salt cellah, like he axed for; but ole man Gascon he must 'a' brung his pigeon wid him, yessah—up his sleeve, I reckon."

A sudden sickening suspicion unnerved Davenport.

"That's all right, Aaron. Sorry to have had to wake you up. Good night!"

So Marta Fields had the potato, and afterward that freak desire to paddle at midnight! She had a dozen chances to hide the ring, and her work as an interior decorator gave her just the sort of rich clientele where anything so indisputably ancestral would find a ready purchaser. A dear girl, Marta, but always hard up, always trying to recoup her losses at bridge—as if all her playmates didn't know that

her no trump was apt to be thin and her double a bluff!

The loss of the ring, which had loomed large a little while ago, would be trifling in comparison with loss of faith in Marta Fields. Peter would have to ask Talbot's help. Perhaps Tal had seen something. Of course his own two friends, who had come only that morning, were beyond suspicion.

Ten minutes ago he would have sworn the same thing about Marta. What a muddle it all was, and how abominable to feel that Marta's passion for gambling might have corroded the finer part of her nature!

Davenport knocked lightly at Talbot's door. There was no answer, but he saw a thin line of light under the door, and after a sharper rap he opened it and went in. The room was dark, and he saw that the light had come from the bathroom, which was empty. He hardly knew what impulse made him go in.

Then he stopped as if he had received an electric shock, for there before him was his wife's ring, lying on the shaving stand, but in three pieces—ring, miniature, and tiny crystal. Neither Peter nor Lisa had known that it could be taken apart. He felt absolutely sickened at the sight, although he had never liked Talbot. Lisa was loyally devoted to him as her nearest kinsman and the last of the Pretherau name, but Peter had thought him rather a morbid young fellow, given to self-pity.

For instance, Talbot hardly concealed his grievance that it was Lisa and not he who owned Gray Oaks, which had belonged to their common great-grandfather. His own grandfather had inherited property which at the time was far more valuable—a home in Charleston and a great rice plantation, while Lisa's grandfather, who was the younger son, received Gray Oaks. The rice plantation had long since relapsed into jungle and marsh, and it was Davenport's money that had redeemed Gray Oaks; but somehow Talbot nursed a grievance.

Going back to his wife, Peter reported that Aaron was too sleepy to give much information, but that he was sure the butler wasn't guilty, and in the morning they would find the ring.

He was up early the next morning, restless and unable to sleep. As he passed Talbot's door he noticed that his shoes, put outside to be cleaned, were caked with a

heavy, dark loam. Law was Davenport's vocation, but gardening was his avocation and his passionate delight. He knew to a nicety which part of the grounds had that rich dark loam, which part had a clay substratum for roses, and which the light, sandy soil for bulbs.

II

At breakfast Talbot Pretherau walked in jauntily and tossed the missing ring in his cousin's lap.

"You careless critter!" he laughed. "I slipped old Gascon a memorial ring I picked up in a Charleston antique junk shop, and you didn't even notice that it wasn't your own ancestor!"

Peter shot a warning glance at her, which she interpreted as a signal not to let her guests know that she had been alarmed.

"I did notice it, Tal. After I was upstairs I saw that I had the wrong ring, but I waited until this morning to exchange it."

Peter's two friends, who had said that they never ate a heavy breakfast, because it made them feel logy for the rest of the day, were too busy over beaten biscuit, hot waffles, and chicken hash to pay any attention to the ring; but Peter was more perplexed than ever, and very far from being satisfied.

They motored to Summerville that day, to see the enchanting village, where wistaria hung in purple festoons from the longleaf pine and tangles of yellow jasmine perfumed the air, where mocking birds sang riotously and spring seemed an actual pervasive presence.

"Very pretty!" said the men, hurrying to the golf course.

At night every one was tired from a day in the open. After they had gone to bed, Peter went into the bedroom opposite Talbot's and waited there for an hour in the darkness, his door slightly ajar. He had nodded off as he sat there in a big armchair, when he heard Talbot's door open softly. The light was on in the hall, and through the crack he could see that Talbot had changed his dinner suit for knickers and an old sweater, and that he had put on heavy shoes with rubber soles.

Peter waited until he heard the front door open and close, and then hurried to the part of the garden where the loam was thick and heavy.

Outside in the dark night, lighted only

by stars, it was easy to follow, concealing himself in the thick shrubbery. Finally, from behind a great clump of azaleas, he watched Talbot pace off a distance—thirty-seven steps each time. Each time Lisa's cousin started from a marble fountain where a boy struggled with a dolphin, counted thirty-seven steps, and stopped as if dissatisfied, as if unable to solve some problem.

Then he took thirty-seven mincing steps, short as a woman's, and that brought him barely beyond a magnolia, the oldest one on the place. He took up a spade, which he had evidently concealed in the shrubbery the night before, and began to dig at the base of the magnolia.

For more than an hour he worked steadily. Toward the end he was so tired that he dug fiercely, spasmodically—but all to no purpose. Then, having gained nothing by all his effort, he put back the earth with his spade, patted it down, and laid back the surface sheets of moss which he had carefully lifted and set to one side. Whatever he was looking for, as the light began to grow brighter toward dawn, the expression of sullen disappointment in his face showed that he had not found it.

Though there was little of the night left for sleep, Davenport was in the old library before breakfast, keen to have a look at the original plan of the garden, made by the landscape artist who had so wisely planned the beauty of Gray Oaks. Lisa and himself had often consulted it in their desire to keep the place as nearly as possible in conformity with the original design.

Davenport located the fountain, made a tentative estimate of the distance of thirty-seven steps, and measured it with a ruler, laid straight down the main path. The line ended at a magnolia, to the right of the path. Now Peter knew that there wasn't any magnolia to the right of the path at that point, though there was a big tree on the left, nearer to the fountain—a tree which showed that once its branches on one side had been dwarfed by another tree growing too close!

After breakfast Davenport ordered two of his outside men to bring their mattocks and spades. He stepped off thirty-seven paces, and it brought him to a triangle of ivy. It was a pleasing spot, and it had been his idea to plant it thickly with red amaryllis, which sprang out of the ground and bloomed before its leaves shot up. The

ivy had supplied a green background for the handsome flowers, but it must be sacrificed to the mystery that he had determined to solve.

"Ole daid stump under dis part of de ivy," said one of the men presently. "Must 'a' been a big tree hyar one time."

"Dig it all up. Must get out all the ivy roots—they're choking the amaryllis."

It was not unusual for Peter to superintend operations in the garden and to take a hand in the actual work of pruning, so the men did not think of his presence as showing any special interest. Time went by, with nothing more exciting to show for it than getting out a great quantity of ivy roots and amaryllis bulbs.

"Needn't go any deeper," he ordered the men, when the whole surface of the triangle was clear and the soil beneath well broken. "Leave a spade here for me—I may want to heel in some of these bulbs. You men go to work on that bamboo I showed you yesterday. It wants to take the whole place."

He sent them off to work on the farther side of Brown Moon Pond, entirely out of sight and sound. Then he began to dig steadily around the spot where the old magnolia stump had been. He was beginning to feel rather a fool for his pains, though he realized that if anything had been buried there long ago, it would be deeper in the ground as the humus of years piled above it.

III

"HELLO! Turned gardener?"

The tone was suave enough, but Talbot's eyes were suspicious, questioning.

"The ivy was choking out the amaryllis I imported from Haarlem," Peter answered casually.

"I should have thought you would let it bloom before digging up the bed. Makes a darned ugly spot," returned Talbot.

The uneasiness he could not hide gave Peter more assurance.

"I'm getting soft—exercise will do me good," he said, and resumed his digging with more confidence because of Talbot's palpable concern.

The minutes went by.

"Need any help?" asked Talbot, but Peter shook his head.

Suddenly there was a jarring sound as his spade struck against metal.

"Good Heavens, what's that?"

Davenport's startled exclamation broke off before the concentrated fury in Talbot's voice.

"Of course it would be your damned luck to find it—you interloper!"

Peter looked up at the younger man, who had bitten off his words; and then there happened the one single thing which could have happened to bring the two men to a better understanding.

Talbot whitened. Every bit of color seemed suddenly to drain out of his cheeks and lips. It made him look very young and boyish, and it made him look like Lisa.

Peter had never forgotten the first time he had seen her angry, when a man on a motor cycle had run over her puppy and had dashed off without stopping. As she stood there looking after him, speechless, the dying puppy in her arms, all the warm color in her face had seemed suddenly drained out of it.

All at once, instead of a petulant, spoiled fellow, Peter saw the younger man as his wife's closest kinsman. He looked so strangely like Lisa as he stood there—dead white and speechless with anger!

Peter assumed not to have heard what Talbot said. With his habit of quick decision, he made up his mind in a moment as to what he would do.

"Lend a hand here, Tal," he said. "We don't want any of the gardeners around while we investigate our find."

Talbot muttered a single bitter word:

"Our!"

Again Peter disregarded his tone and twisted the thought to a better purpose.

"Of course it's ours, or rather it's yours and Lisa's, if it's anything worth having. In buying Gray Oaks I didn't buy what your ancestors may have happened to put underground. Maybe it's a hidden scandal; but I'm out of it—it's a Prethereau responsibility!"

By this time he had uncovered what was evidently an old sole leather trunk, which had fallen apart, leaving a strong box exposed.

"Tell you what, Tal—get the wheelbarrow, and let's trundle this to the house and open it with Lisa there. She mustn't miss any of this 'Treasure Island' experience. Above all, we don't want any of the gardeners to find out about it, or they'll be burrowing holes like rabbits all over the place!"

Talbot's wrath had given place to keen

excitement. He got the wheelbarrow, and together, with some difficulty, they managed to get the box into it. They covered their find with ivy and trundled it to the house, where they found Lisa in the morning room.

"Marta invited herself to go fishing with the men, and I sat down here to slay my correspondence, and now you two come crashing into my good resolutions! What ever have you got there, boys?"

As she asked the question, she spread the Sunday newspaper on the floor. The men deposited the box on it.

"We dug this up under the old magnolia," said Peter.

"Magnolia?" echoed Tal, bewildered. "But there wasn't one there!"

"Get a hammer, quick!" cried Lisa. "Oh, all my life I longed to find a hidden treasure! You were lambs to bring it here!"

The rusted hasp gave way with no need of a hammer. The box was filled with bags, evidently made of some stout hand-woven material, for parts of them were still intact.

"Doubloons—pieces of eight?" demanded Lisa excitedly. "Pirates?"

Talbot had rubbed a tarnished coin against the rug until it glimmered bright and golden.

"Twenty-dollar gold pieces. All seem to be the same. Hello, here's something else!"

It was an oblong package, once carefully wrapped in unginned cotton, for the seeds were still there. Lisa's hands trembled as she unwrapped it.

"Oh, Peter, it's the cup! *The cup!*" The exquisite lines of the Pretherau cup defied tarnish. "Oh, look at the fat little cherubs! Peter, do you see how the wings make the handle? Tal, don't you feel as if you'd always known just how it would look?"

Inside it was filled with the same fibrous stuff, which was plainly cotton, in spite of the change and discoloration. As Lisa began to take it out carefully, her fingers caught in a slender chain. Her voice was a tremble of rapture.

"The Pretherau sapphire! It's the sapphire! Oh, Tal, it's our great-great-grandmother's pendant! Oh, Peter, Peter!" Her arms went around her husband's neck as she kissed him impetuously. "The one solitary thing in the world I wanted! With

you and our boys and Gray Oaks, I had everything else!"

She shook the slender chain, and, as if leaping to light after its long imprisonment, the sapphire seemed to glow with an inner blue fire.

"The diamonds around it are straw-colored, almost as deep as topazes. That's what gave it the color that we couldn't understand in the miniature. It's the very loveliest thing I ever saw in my life, and different from anything else anywhere!"

In her joy she noticed that Tal's eyes were somber.

"What's Tal's share, Peter?" she asked impulsively.

"The money, naturally," he returned. "The pendant is yours by inheritance, as it was willed to your mother. I'm claiming that cup for the boys to scrap over, and that leaves Tal the cash."

The pride in his wife's eyes was reward enough. Lisa knew that Peter had felt they could not buy a new car this year, because of heavy expenses connected with Gray Oaks, and that the money would have been opportune. She radiated pride in him as she said:

"Let's count it, Tal dear!"

He threw back his head challengingly—another gesture like Lisa's.

"I—I must explain things first," he stammered. "Lisa, you remember old Sweeney?"

She nodded. Peter and herself had taken care of the old negro after he had grown too old to work.

"His mind had been feeble for a long time, but it seemed to clear toward the end. I dropped in one day to see him, and he said:

"'Marse Tal, I'se gwine ter tell yer sumpin. I buried a trunk fer ole miss 'fo' de Yankees come. She didn't want me ter know whah it wuz, so ef de soldiers come along an' axed me I kin say I dunno. Ef dey sez dey's gwine ter hurt me, all I kin say is I dunno. She tied a hankcher ovah mah eyes an' counted mah steps an' led me ter a place spang by a magnolyer saplin', 'cause I feel uv de bark. Den I dug a hole—lawdy, dat hole seem deeper'n a well! Den I buried dat ole sole leather trunk in de hole, de same one marster use ter put on de back uv de buggy when he go ter de plantation ter shoot rice birds. De nex' day ole miss showed me dat ring wid de picter she all time wear, an' she

sez, "Ef anything happens ter me, Sawney, tell yer marster ter look under de picter in mah ring, an' he kin find out whah de trunk is; an' doan nebbah tell nobody but him." I promised her, an' den she died herse'f after dey tolle her marster was kilt. I done promised not to tell nobody but marster, an' wid him daid I dunno what ter do. Now you'se de ve'y spit an' image uv marster, Marse Tal, speshly when he looked sorter upset; so I reckon it's right ter tell you dere's money in dat trunk—eight thousand dollars in sho' nuff money, not Con-federick money, Marse Tal. Dat warn't no 'count after marster died."

Lisa was leaning forward, breathless with excitement.

"You remember the night Gascon was here? I took your ring to my room, examined it under a powerful magnifying glass, and saw that one of the pearls concealed a tiny spring. Between the minature and the gold back was a scrap of paper, on which was written:

"Fountain—37 steps—north of magnolia.

"Then I—"

A warning look shot straight at the younger man from Peter Davenport's clear gray eyes.

"That's enough," it said plainly. "I understand, old chap. Don't you *dare* trouble my wife with a confession!"

"Then *we*," amended Peter, "for it's my turn to leap into the limelight."

He gave a humorous account of the amaryllis bed, and the digging, and the help given by the chart of the garden. Lisa gave a happy sigh and clapped her hands when the story ended.

"I'm a pig!" she said. "Tal, old precious, I'm so awfully glad about your money that you won't mind if I'm still gladder about my sapphire and my cup?"

Talbot turned to Peter.

"Not a cent of this belongs to me legally, of course. It's your wonderful generosity, and I accept it more gratefully than you can know. It seemed to me that I just must have some money, now that Gabrielle has promised to marry me! We can manage on my salary, but it was humiliating to take her to our old home, which is so architecturally delightful on the outside, and inside needs every convenience from decent bathrooms to a furnace and clean paint. It makes every possible difference in my life—and I didn't deserve it!"

His young voice was husky as he put his hand on Peter's shoulder.

"I always had an inward conviction," murmured Lisa pensively, "that the Northern soldiers had nothing whatever to do with the loss of the pendant."

Behind her back the two men winked at each other. Not only had the Pretherau treasures been exhumed from the magnolia stump, but the specter of the "Yankee hoodlums" had received a decent burial!

R A I N

Do you know the soothing sweetness of the rain
When the sky is gray and hazy,
And the whole wide world is lazy,
And it makes no difference when you work again?

Have you listened to its chuckle and its splash?
Heard the rhythm in its beating,
Lived the tales that it's repeating,
Sensed the lilting, care-free mischief in its dash?

Have you stood out in the open when it falls?
Let the little drops erratic
Peck against your face like static,
Felt the thrill and true elation which it calls?

That's the only way to take a lazy rain;
Listen to the songs it sings you,
Drift away on dreams it brings you,
Leave your troubles till the sunshine comes again!

Virginia Goff

That's for Remembrance

TELLING HOW DAPHNE HILLIER, BACHELOR GIRL, SUGGESTED
A RATHER UNUSUAL TREATMENT FOR A CASE OF
LOST MEMORY—IN A MAN, OF COURSE

By A. M. Burrage

FOR her sins and mine, I had taken Mrs. Jelland in to dinner. This was probably due to a spice of malice in an otherwise perfect hostess. Mrs. Jelland is a chatterer, but she is not one of the egotistical chatters who want to do all the talking.

These latter are easily endured, for one can fall into a comfortable comatose state and merely say "Yes," or "No," when the brief periods of silence are left ringing with notes of interrogation. In those circumstances a sort of sixth sense informs one whether he should use the affirmative or the negative. That is not an insupportable situation. Your partner is happy, and you are courteous without being bored to the very limits of endurance.

Mrs. Jelland, however, is far more dangerous. She rations her own periods of talk, as if an invisible presiding officer were in control of the situation. Having rattled away like a human typewriter for a certain number of seconds, or even minutes, she pauses. It is now your turn. You are expected to rattle away on the same subject for precisely the same length of time.

She has all the instincts of a stop watch. This means that you must keep on the alert and have your piece ready to say, even although you may know nothing and care less about Chinese embroidery or the People's Theater movement.

My other neighbor was a very pretty girl of twenty-three or so, with the brightest blue eyes I had ever seen in my life. She had a mother at the other end of the table. I had been introduced to both, but had failed to catch their name. I could see that she, too, was bored and preoccupied. When the soup was served, she had allowed the glass at her elbow to be filled

with sherry, but she had left it untouched, and was obviously setting her ears to catch fragments of conversation from across the table, while from time to time she nibbled salted almonds.

In setting an apparently sympathetic ear toward Mrs. Jelland, I half turned my face in the pretty girl's direction. The man on her far side had little or nothing to say, and I would have loved to talk to her. I thought it an unfair sort of world; but she came to my rescue when Mrs. Jelland reached one of her pauses, which seemed to say:

"Now go on—it's *your* turn!"

She pushed the dish of salted almonds toward me with a smile.

"Will you please do me a favor," she said, "and push these out of my reach? Otherwise I shall certainly eat them all."

"With pleasure. I happen to like salted almonds myself."

"It's nice to find out so soon that we've something in common," said the girl, with a hint of mischief in her very blue eyes. "Do you believe in affinities, Mr. Collins?"

"I didn't, but I've just been converted. Do you like eggs soft-boiled or hard-boiled?"

"I hate eggs," Miss Blue Eyes told me.

"It's marvelous!" I murmured, lost in amazement. "Surely it was fate that brought us together!"

"No, it wasn't—it was Mrs. Lymore. She said she always fought with you, and there'd be murder done if she had to sit next to you throughout a dinner; so our places at table were changed. It's a pity that people who breed Airedales can never be friends with people who breed Alsatians."

"Don't say *you* prefer Alsatians," I begged.

She nodded and laughed, and I sighed unhappily.

"All my illusions are destroyed," I said. "I was beginning to hope that we saw eye to eye about everything."

"Do you think it's necessary to do that to hit it off?" she asked. "I've always thought that *Mr.* and *Mrs.* *Jack Sprat* must have been an ideal couple."

"A marriage of *convenience*," I said. "And how the butcher must have hated them! I am an incurable romantic. I believe I have an affinity somewhere, but always, when I think I have found her, she unmasks. She admits that she likes Wagner or plovers' eggs, or both. That is why you behold me, still unmarried, in the August of my days."

I saw her looking for the salted almonds, but they were well out of her reach, and I deliberately refrained from passing them to her.

"I met my affinity once," she remarked casually.

"Really? And what happened?"

"Oh, I fell in love with him, of course! I was fifteen at the time. It was a very serious affair."

"And I suppose he was fat, middle-aged, and married, and used to pat you on the head and ask you how the school basket ball team was doing."

"No, he was only seventeen; but it all came to nothing, through a family feud. We were torn asunder by the hands of cruel parents. There are still *Montagues* and *Capulets* in the world, you know."

"A plague o' both their houses," said I.

Then I felt that I really had to turn and say something to Mrs. Jelland, who was now engaged in a general and desultory conversation. She was talking about her own defective memory, and admitted having lost her engagement book and having been doubtful, until she had rung up a friend, if her dinner engagement was on this or the following evening.

"I think I must subscribe to one of those wonderful institutions, and go through a course of memory training," she said.

"I shouldn't!" said a fair-haired, frivolous young man sitting opposite. "It's much pleasanter to forget things than to remember them. People with consciences must find it perfectly hateful to remember

all the details of their past lives. If some firm were to advertise its ability to teach people the art of forgetfulness, there'd be a rush to take shares. *Lethe, Limited*, would be a good name. The lucky people in this world are the people who've lost their memories."

He was not a fortunate young man. The brick that he had dropped fell with a loud crash right into the middle of the table, and most people around him busied themselves in pretending that they hadn't heard it; but for my part I didn't mind the subject in the least.

"You're wrong there," I said quietly. "You probably don't know my cousin, Francis Merton."

"What, has he— I'm awfully sorry! Of course, I didn't know."

"Wasn't he hurt playing football?" Mrs. Jelland asked in a low voice.

"Yes—bad head injuries, including concussion. There's nothing the matter with his brain, but his memory's entirely gone, right up to the time of the accident. He has to lead a pretty retired life. Unless one has thought it out very carefully, one can't realize what a dreadful handicap loss of memory is. When one comes to think of it, nine-tenths of one's thoughts are really memories."

A hand touched my arm. It belonged to the girl with the very blue eyes. They were shining now, and almost moist.

"I didn't know—he had had an accident," she said jerkily. "I used to know him. Do you mind telling me about him? Or oughtn't I to ask?"

"It happened four years ago," I told her. "I don't know if he'll get his memory back. Doctors disagree about that; but it has spoiled his life, poor fellow. You see, he's sensitive about it, and he hates meeting people who know him, and whom he hasn't the vaguest recollection of having met before. Of course, too, he's terribly handicapped in conversation. He can't discuss anything that didn't happen in the last four years; so he leads a hermit's life, pottering about in the country. Fortunately for him, he has enough to live on comfortably without having to work."

I saw that her head had drooped.

"Poor thing!" she said softly. "Can't he remember anything at all? Is it like looking back at a blank wall?"

"Not quite like that, as far as I can understand. He speculates about his past,

I think—weaves in romantic little stories which never happened, just as most of us look into the future and weave romantic little stories which never will happen. In one respect his memory isn't entirely gone, for he retains his education. Things which have been instilled into his mind he keeps; but memories of people, places, and incidents are all gone. When did you know him?"

"Oh, some time ago," she replied hastily. "I'm so awfully sorry! Even if he did remember something, I suppose he wouldn't know that he hadn't just imagined it."

"I suppose so. I think he does get gleams. We had great hopes of him three years ago. For some reason or other he demanded to be taken to Penhilloc, in Cornwall."

"Penhilloc!" she repeated with a catch in her breath.

"Yes. Well, what seemed so promising was that he'd been there as a boy, although nobody had told him so, and he couldn't possibly have known it without a flash of memory. I motored him down, and we all hoped that the sight of the place might set the stopped machinery in motion once more; but it didn't. As a matter of fact, he *didn't* remember having been there, and didn't know the place when he saw it. His wanting to go there was strange, for it's a remote little seaside town."

I thought I saw a tremor pass through her frame.

"Three years ago," she said in a very low voice. "Was it in August?"

"Yes," said I mildly surprised.

There was a pause, during which she fidgeted with her table napkin.

"What a disappointment for you!" she said shakily at last. "Didn't anything happen there at all?"

"Nothing. Oh, yes—one queer thing he did. There's an old ruin of a castle on a headland above the town. He went out one evening and spent the whole night wandering around it. I couldn't drag him away, and he couldn't, or wouldn't, explain what he wanted there. He said he didn't know."

I heard her draw a long breath, and saw her look up into the shadows above the shaded lights.

"Was that the night of the 23rd of August?" she asked presently.

"I don't know. I don't remember the date. But why? You weren't down there at the time, were you?"

"No—oh, no! I don't know what made me think of that particular date. Please—please believe how very sorry I am about him."

That seemed to close the subject. Besides, I had neglected Mrs. Jelland all too long. After that the girl with the very blue eyes had little to say to me; but when the ladies rose she hovered and bent over me.

"I can't talk to you here," she said hastily, in a low voice. "Can you call on me? It's about Francis Merton. Perhaps I may be able to help. I shall be in after three to-morrow. Please do come!"

"I will with pleasure," I said, hiding my astonishment. "Will you give me the address?"

"No. 15 Millicent Road, Lancaster Gate," she said in my ear, and turned to hurry to the door.

I saw her afterward in the drawing-room, but not for many minutes. She and her mother were going on to some other house. I was left to wonder for the next several hours why she had been so mysterious, and how she thought that she could help poor Francis.

II

TACTFUL inquiries of our hostess provided me with the girl's name, which I had not hitherto properly heard. It was Daphne Hillier. I should have been glad in any case of an excuse to call, for she certainly was pretty, and she had begun by amusing me; but another and more urgent reason presented me at her address at half past three on the following afternoon.

Daphne had her own sitting room on the drawing-room floor. Evidently she had left instructions concerning me, for I was ushered straight thither. It was a manly sort of room, more library and smoke room than boudoir. I noticed that there were ash trays everywhere, and the books on the shelves were mostly volumes of modern verses and essays.

If a room betrays the character of its owner, then here I had to deal with an up-to-date, cultured, and emancipated young person; but last night she had seemed soft and feminine and sweet enough. The room hinted plainly at a striving against her own personality. Na-

ture had intended her to be wooed and loved and kissed, and she was trying so hard, poor dear, to be that shorn, sexless monstrosity which calls itself a bachelor girl.

I had not been in the room a minute before Daphne joined me. She was wearing an afternoon gown which exactly matched her eyes, and she greeted me with a smile and a firm, boyish handshake.

"Do sit," she said, "and please smoke. Those are Egyptians in that box, but I've got some gaspers in the drawer here if you prefer them." She sat down in a very low armchair and clasped her thin knees. "I wonder if you'll think I've brought you here on a wild-goose chase! When I woke up this morning, it all seemed utterly absurd and far-fetched; yet I think I ought to say what I am going to say, although I don't know how to begin to tell it."

"If it concerns Francis—" I began.

"It does—to what extent, you must judge for yourself. It seems to me that there's a chance that I might help him. I told you that I knew him, but I didn't tell you how long ago. It was in the summer, toward the end of the war. We were both children."

She paused and looked away from me.

"I told you at dinner last night that I had met my affinity. I was joking, of course, because I don't believe in such things, and, even if they existed, children would be the last to find it out; but I had somebody in mind, and that somebody was Francis Merton. I told you that I fell in love with him, and I meant that quite literally and seriously. I think a childish love is about the only genuine kind. It is perfectly unselfish; it has a magnificent contempt for all the exigencies of life. Its possessor hasn't learned to tear the poor thing to shreds, and analyze it, and call it by nasty names. Love is a game fit only for children, who are able to give and receive perfect trust, and who believe themselves to be the prince and princess of those fairy tales which all end alike. I've experimented since, you see. I've given and taken scratches, and I know what I'm saying.

"I was just fifteen, and they had taken me on a holiday to Cornwall, to get away from the air raids. We stayed at the Castle Hotel, Penhilloc. Cornwall was full of schoolboys and schoolgirls in those days, because it was safe; and it had attracted

a lot of other people, too, who wanted to get away from the danger zone. At the hotel we met a Colonel and Mrs. Merton, and their son Francis, a tall, fair-haired schoolboy of seventeen, who went about all day long in a Marlborough blazier. I suppose Colonel Merton is your uncle?"

"Yes."

"Well, my father—he's dead now—and Colonel Merton knew each other slightly, and we were very soon friends with the Mertons. My mother and Mrs. Merton hit it off beautifully together. It was one of those friendships which blaze up too quickly to last. Colonel Merton, you'll remember, had been wounded early in the war, and then had a job in the War Office. He was one of those fire eaters who really wanted to get back to the front. He almost foamed at the mouth whenever he mentioned the enemy. He wanted to see every German not only dead, but damned. My father was a philosopher, and therefore moderate and tolerant—a man of wide and varied learning, who never spoke or thought intemperately. I don't mean that he wasn't a good patriot, but he was the last man in the world to be carried away by popular catch phrases or believe implicitly every word he read in the newspapers.

"At Penhilloc our respective families split up into pairs. The two men had at least one thing in common—they were fond of fishing for bass and pollock. Our mothers liked to sit sunning themselves on the cliff head, busy all the time sewing and knitting for the soldiers' hospitals. That left Francis and me to play tennis, or ramble along the coast, or explore caves which we fondly hoped had been used by smugglers.

"I suppose we were an unusual pair of children. At those ages we ought to have been despising each other's youth. I ought to have been flabbily in love, at a distance, with some matinée idol, and he ought to have been the sheepish idolater of some not too young matron; but it simply wasn't so. There are exceptions to all these rough cast laws of nature. We just fell in love with each other.

"I like men to talk to, to joke with, to fence with, but I know them too well now ever to want to marry. I've chased that ridiculous illusion love to its last hiding place and exposed the humbug. I admit I've been half in love a dozen times, and

wholly in love once—and that once was with Francis. To me he was the embodiment of all my heroes of story and legend. I don't know why. I should say, looking back dispassionately, that he was just an ordinary nice boy; but, children though we were, we lived in that atmosphere of hasty love—while the war was on—when love and death were treading on each other's heels. Although we hadn't realized what was happening to the Olympians who were three or four years older than ourselves, the infection was in the air, and we seemed to catch it.

"I suppose we were as absurd as any other two children trying to play at being grown up. We told each other fifty times a day how much we loved each other, but we only kissed twice. We were tremendously shy and afraid of the miracle that brought the color to our cheeks when our eyes met or our hands touched. Don't think we were too precocious. We hid nine-tenths of our sentiment. We meant to marry, but marriage was something almost as remote as death, and not yet to be thought of.

"Those were wonderful days. I suppose I was as nearly completely happy as it is possible to be in an imperfect world. Even the shadow of the war hardly touched us. If it lasted another year, Francis would be old enough to join the army. I hardly knew whether I wanted him safe at home or wanted him to show the world what a hero he was.

"Then, suddenly, without any warning, our fools' paradise came to an end. I don't know the details, but for some reason our respective fathers quarreled. I believe Colonel Merton called my father a pacifist, which was about the most opprobrious word that anybody could use in those days. I can imagine how my father, with his fine brain and keen ironic tongue, replied to him. Probably he stung Colonel Merton into using some cruder abuse. Each man was sure that the other had insulted him; so both families decided to leave Penhilloc, although, at the most, there was only need for one to have gone.

"I was allowed to say good-by to Francis. That was the second time we kissed. I rested in his arms and cried. We weren't even to be allowed to write to each other. All our hopes rested in the very far future, when we should both be of age and able to do as we chose. Guess what compact

we made! No, guess why I suggested that the night when Francis behaved so strangely was the 23rd of August."

I shook my head.

"How can I?" I said.

"Because the 23rd of August, three years ago, was my twenty-first birthday. You see, we decided that when that day came, I should be allowed to do exactly as I liked; but we both swore solemnly that we would meet by the old ruin on the headland on the night of my twenty-first birthday."

Her eyes suddenly dimmed.

"And he was there, poor darling! Lost memory and all, he was there!"

"And you weren't," I said quietly.

She laughed at that.

"Would anybody have expected me to do anything so idiotic? I was fifteen when I made that promise. Even if I had wanted to see him again, think of the chances against his keeping the appointment! And I didn't particularly want to see him again. I had a crush for somebody else at the time. Nobody with the least grain of sense would have expected either of us to be there."

"The point is this," said I. "If you had been, would he have remembered you? It's quite clear to me that, deep in his subconsciousness, he knew that he had an appointment at that place and time. If he had seen you, would he have recognized you, and would that have set the machinery of his memory working again?"

"That's why I wanted to talk to you. I'm willing to try, if you like. Bring him to that spot some night, and I'll meet him there."

I stood up.

"It's worth trying," I said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"I don't need thanks, I assure you," she told me.

"But wait a moment," I went on. "Suppose he does know you?"

"Then we can cheer, can't we?"

"Yes, but—suppose he renews his youthful infatuation? I've heard you say one or two cynical things about men and love."

She smiled almost derisively.

"I ask you, is it likely?" she said. "If people were all faithful to their first loves, there would be some very funny marriages!"

"Since you ask me, it's very likely, indeed. You must have made a strong im-

pression on him, or he wouldn't have done what he did. Suppose he falls in love with you, what are you going to do about it? Answer me that!"

She reached for a cigarette and fumbled irritably with the lid of the box.

"Need we meet trouble halfway?" she asked. "If I give him back his memory, won't that satisfy him?"

"I've never lost my memory," I returned, "or suffered from unrequited love, so I don't know which is the worse."

She lit the cigarette, and her blue eyes hardened as they looked up into mine.

"Shall he risk it?" she asked. "It's for you to say."

"It ought to be his choice, but I must choose for him. He shall risk it. When can you come?"

She considered.

"The end of next week, if that suits you," she said. "There are one or two conventions still hanging on worn threads, and I suppose I shall have to dig up an elderly female cousin to accompany me. That won't be difficult. What are elderly female cousins for? We'd better start planning the campaign. He mustn't see me until we actually meet outside the ruin. Will you be going down by road or by rail?"

I sat down again, and we began to lay our plans.

III

I HAD no difficulty at all in persuading Francis to accompany me to Penhilloc for a few days' "loafing," as I described the proposed excursion. He hated going about by himself, but he was always grateful for the company of anybody who knew him well. Besides, on his visit to Penhilloc three years before, he had said that the place had a strong attraction for him.

So, at the end of the following week, I spent a long, tiring day driving him down in my two-seater, and correctly timed our arrival at the Castle Hotel at nine o'clock. By that time, I knew, two ladies who had arrived that day by rail would have had dinner, and one of them would be safely off the premises.

I noticed a gray-haired woman in the lounge look at us curiously, smile, and make a tentative bow to me. This I guessed to be the elderly female cousin, and I knew that they had both arrived, and that so far all was well.

Then began the real difficulty. It was a tremendous task to get Francis to walk with me as far as the ruined castle. He said that he was tired and wanted to go to bed, and that he had no use just then for the moldy old ruin. I nearly had to drag him there by sheer force.

It must have been half past ten before we reached the top of the headland. The moon had come up behind the remains of the castle, and the old pile was a black silhouette against the luminous sky. Everything was still, and at first I thought that we had the place to ourselves; but, as we drew near, a girl's figure rose from a boulder.

"Hello!" I said, trying to control my voice. "Somebody's here!"

A few seconds later I heard the strangest cry I have ever heard from a man's lips. It came from Francis, and it ended in the one word:

"Daphne!"

I turned quickly away as they rushed together and clung. I walked about for more than an hour before returning to the hotel. It seemed like a cure, but I wasn't too happy about it. Daphne had shown me pretty plainly that she wasn't the marrying sort. Having heard that cry, I knew well enough that Francis was going to resume being in love with the divinity of his early boyhood. He was a man who felt deeply, and he might easily prefer oblivion to hopeless love. Thank Heaven that I'm one of the easy-going sort!

When I got back to the hotel, I found them alone together in the lounge. Francis was saying something which began with—

"Do you remember?"

Neither of them seemed to notice me, so I slipped out; but an hour later I waylaid Daphne on her way to bed. Her eyes were wet and shining, but she smiled when she saw me.

"Oh, thank God!" she said softly, and hid her little wet face against my sleeve.

"Yes," I said, "it's a cure all right, but it's a question whether the patient won't suffer a worse infliction, an exchange of evils. What are you going to do about it now?"

She looked up at me and smiled again, and the light in her eyes took away a load from my mind.

"Oh," she said, making an effort to speak lightly, "I suppose I had better make a thorough job of it now, hadn't I?"

The Unofficial Delegate

TELLING HOW SIMEON LARA, FOR A CONSIDERATION, UNDER-
TOOK TO CHECKMATE DON GILBERTO CANALES'S
REVOLUTION IN THE REPUBLIC OF OLANCHO

By John Steuart Erskine

THE dice rolled noisily across the bare wooden table.

"Four kings!" announced Simeon Lara triumphantly. "You pay again!"

He laughed a husky, offensive laugh, as if to range his companion and all the world under the feet of his colossal conceit. His fat buckskin face sneered patronizingly at the dice that dared not defy him, and he leaned back in his rough wooden chair and called to the woman at the bar:

"Two double whiskies, Concha!"

The small, bare room in which the two men sat combined the characters of both canteen and shop, for on one side half a dozen bottles were ranged along the scaling whitewashed wall, while on the other a few rolls of cheap *manta* cloth were piled on a narrow counter. Through the single window poured the slanting sun of afternoon, and the heat under the corrugated iron roof was deadening.

Izopa, the tiny coast town of which Simeon Lara was commandant, lay quiet within its half circle of fiery sand, save where a single sambo fisherman stalked, harpoon on shoulder, in the shallow water. The hovels of the sambos, a people of mixed Indian and negro blood, clustered under the tall coconut palms—tiny houses with roofs of palmetto thatch, and with walls only on the seaward side, from which the winter winds blew. In the shade of a tree one man, black-faced but with Indian features, thumped a drum and wailed mournfully. Two women, dressed only in short kilts, made their way to the river with great calabashes.

Simeon stared across the beach at the line of canoes drawn up on the sand.

"It will soon be time for my harvest," he remarked in his harsh, contemptuous

voice. "Next month the sambos will be coming back from the mahogany works of Belize. They will have money and contraband!"

He laughed huskily. It was his duty to stop the smuggling along this coast, and the fines that he imposed were his own profit.

Mercedes, the storekeeper, looked up, his gray eyes watery, his thin, fever-yellowed face blank and apathetic. The climate of the coast did not suit him, but he had forgotten the feeling of robust health and had ceased to care. Here he had made his home, and the trade was sufficient to earn him the drink that he loved. Here he was king, for he had the temper of a demon, and murder was as familiar to him as drunkenness. One would never have guessed from his frail, stooping body how many unwary guests of his had gone to feed the alligators of the Wanki bar.

"You will reap only a small harvest this year," he said in his weak, monotonous voice. "The sambos are afraid of the journey. Last year, when they crossed the bay of Barrios, a shark upset three of their canoes. Some few have gone this year, but they will edge around the gulf and get caught by the authorities of both Guatemala and Honduras before they reach here. There will be small pickings left for you, Simeon."

"Vaya!" snorted Simeon impatiently. "The coast is full of such tales. In my Honduras we have a real danger. I would rather arrest a shark than a canoe load of Carib smugglers. They have murdered many commandants by diving, swimming under water, upsetting the canoes, and knifing the swimming men. I think it better to drive them ashore and shoot if they come too close."

Concepcion, the Indian wife of Mercedes, soft-featured, kind-eyed, and with a high, smooth forehead, brought the whisky.

"*Salud!*" said the two men together, and tossed off the stiff drinks, following them with a gulp of water.

"Let us roll for the next," suggested Simeon, picking up the dice box.

A barefooted soldier, his ragged straw hat pulled low over his eyes, appeared in the doorway. He stared stupidly around him, for the half light of the canteen seemed darkness after the blinding sun.

"*Señor,*" he said timidly to Simeon, "there is a man waiting for you in the *comandancia*—a general."

Simeon stared for a moment, as if failing to understand the words. He had been drinking hard all the afternoon, and, although he boasted that his head was the strongest in Central America, he was already a little drunk. To his slow mind it seemed beyond the bounds of possibility that any high officer should have visited this remote frontier village. He heaved himself to his uncertain feet.

"I must go and see," he said thickly. "This fool knows nothing. Until soon, Mercedes!"

He picked up his broad Stetson hat and stumbled out into the blazing sunlight. For a moment the heat made him stagger, and his face reddened and swelled. Then he recovered his balance and strode away up the beach, showing no sign of the whisky that he had consumed.

Before him stood the little wooden *comandancia* with its shady porch of corrugated iron, under which three ragged soldiers squatted on their heels, playing a game of cards. They glanced up as Simeon passed them, but they made no movement of respect.

In the dark room Simeon found a familiar face awaiting him.

"Don Beltran!" he exclaimed, the insolence gone from his voice. "What luck brings you to Izopa?"

The newcomer, a tall, thin man with grizzled hair and a shrewd brown face, gestured Simeon to a chair with the authority of a man in high position.

"I have come to inspect the coast," he said smoothly; "but for the moment I desire only a private talk with you. You may send away your soldiers and the secretary."

Simeon dispatched the old secretary to

his house and shooed the soldiers away from the porch. Then he closed and locked the creaky old door and returned to the table where Don Beltran sat.

"At your orders, general," he said meekly.

The newcomer tilted his chair back against the wall and caught his heels in the rungs.

"It is to me that you owe your present position, Lara," he began, speaking in a soft, slightly nasal voice. "In our revolution you did me a service, and you know that I repaid you well, although you were a Honduranian. Now I have another work for you, and I have asked the president to remove you from your post as commandant of Izopa."

Simeon's face became emporpled with angry suspicion, but he said no word.

"In exchange," the newcomer went on gently, "the president promises to make you commandant of Ojelota—if, within three months, you fulfill a certain condition. To this he will add a present of three thousand *pesos*—also subject to the condition."

Simeon leaned forward, his face hungry with greed. Once before he had owned that much money, the spoils of a fortunate revolution, and he still recalled the weeks of joy, of drunkenness, of glory, that had been his before it was wholly spent.

"What is the condition?" he asked.

"Last year," Don Beltran continued, "Gilberto Canales failed in his revolution because he had no money with which to buy arms. The people were with him, but we put him to flight. Now he is planning another revolution, and the president, feeling that the loss of life and property in the country would be serious, has decided that it is his duty to prevent the attempt."

"Ah!" murmured Simeon understandingly.

"Canales is now in Belize, where he is trying to secure a loan, rifles, and a schooner. I do not know what concessions he offers in exchange. If he secures these things, he will be able to land anywhere along the Atlantic coast and raise an army which the government will have trouble to subdue. The president will give three thousand *pesos* and the *comandancia* of Ojelota if Canales dies before the venture begins. You know Belize well, so I suggested you. Furthermore, as you have fought under Canales in the past, you can

offer to do so again, and he will see nothing unlikely in your having changed sides."

Simeon frowned, for he did not like the suggestion that his conduct had savored of disloyalty. Like most born traitors, he was convinced that fidelity was his greatest virtue.

"Santiago Morrison," he muttered.

The newcomer nodded.

"Such is our information," he agreed. "He seeks the loan from Santiago Morrison."

James Morrison was a wise old Scot who in his youth had found life made to his hand. Scruples, cowardice, and stupidity were alike strange to his nature, and he had found riches and a full life in the service of those who stood outside the law.

In mahogany he had made the dollars that had served him for capital, and with this start he had smuggled cheap guns across the frontiers of Guatemala and Yucatan, and had sold them at two hundred per cent profit to the wild Maya Indians of the lands where civilization had not yet penetrated. He had financed the chicle hunters of the forests and the illicit gold traders of the rivers. He had bought his own schooner, and had run arms to the revolutionaries of the four eastern republics of Central America.

Playing on his knowledge of human nature, he had financed politicians in their campaigns, and had overturned governments with a shipload of rifles and money. Security he never asked; but instead he demanded one hundred per cent profit, and he got it.

His house was the haunt of the adventurers of all the coast—of politicians who moved uncomfortably in their chairs, embarrassed by the revolvers which in the British colony must be carried inside the shirt, instead of in the holster; of Carib chiefs who smuggled goods and passengers up the narrow bay of Honduras, and who sat on the step, talking in rolling gutturals to Morrison, who understood their tongue as well as they; of Maya kings from Yucatan, telling him their needs of smuggled goods, for which they would exchange mahogany concessions. When evening came, his mulatto wife and the negro butler would clear away his empty whisky bottles and carry him to bed.

"I shall leave to-morrow," said Simeon thoughtfully. "It will be better to paddle, for the coasting boats of Utila stop at

every port, and are very slow. I shall reach Belize in a week. If Canales is there, I shall find him!"

II

THE next morning Simeon's long, narrow canoe, with four sambo paddlers, set out from the mouth of the Wanki River, which divides Olancho from Honduras, and slipped swiftly along the shore that separates the sea and the long lagoon of Caratasca. It was afternoon when they passed the mouth of the Guayape, with its little sambo village of Patuca, and skirted the coconut groves of Brewer's Lagoon. They slept that night in the house of a prosperous Carib who owned a *cocal* at the lagoon bar.

In the morning they went on. When they passed the village at the mouth of the Plantain River, the sambos fishing in the shallow water cried "*Paratia!*" to them, and the paddlers waved their paddles and cried back:

"*Paratia!*"

They coasted along the fringe of sambo villages that straddle the strip of sand between the sea and the long Iban lagoon, passed the mouths of the Black River, and left the country of the sambos behind. Now the canoes that rode the waves were manned by Carib negroes, and the myriad children playing along the shore were black and frizzy-haired.

At Iriona, Simeon changed his sambo paddlers for black Caribs, and went on. They passed the ports of the banana coast, and at last they saw before them the low land of British Honduras.

During the long days of paddling, Simeon had thought out his plan of campaign. Where the carrion was, there would the eagles be gathered together. There would be nothing unnatural in his coming like another vulture to seek food at the table of James Morrison. If Canales were not there, he would be in Belize. Lara must seek him out and offer him his services.

The week had just slipped by when Simeon stepped out of his canoe at the little village of Marston's Lagoon. He left his men to find themselves food and lodging in the Carib houses, and climbed the steep hill to the white, wooden house of James Morrison.

The long, screened veranda was empty when he approached the door, but he remarked that a swinging seat was still jig-

gling with a short, uneven motion that could not have been caused by the wind, and he saw a broad Stetson hat lying on a chair. He knocked loudly, and after a few moments a small negro boy, dressed neatly in white, appeared at the end of the big hall and came to the screen door to answer the summons.

"Señor Morrison?" he replied in bad Spanish to Simeon's question. "I ask for him."

He padded away, and for a moment there was silence in the big house. A Carib conch shell blared softly from the sea below, and in the servants' quarters a parrot chuckled and squawked. Encouraged by the stillness, a large brown cockroach sallied out of a crack and made short dashes about the wainscoting, stopping nervously from time to time, his long antennæ quivering with terror.

From an inner room came the sound of heavy boots dragged wearily over the bare mahogany floor, and a tall old man with a long, white beard slouched into the hall and approached Simeon with his hand held out in welcome.

"It is ten years that I have not seen you, Don Simeon," he remarked in perfect Spanish, his voice deep and musical. "Come, sit down, and tell me to what I owe this honor." He raised his voice. "Bwai!" The little negro appeared in the doorway. "Go hax de misses fe sen' a bottle o' whisky come."

The two men faced each other across the table. The negro boy placed a bottle of whisky, a jug of water, and six glasses beside them, and glanced about as if expecting to see another guest.

"G'way," ordered Morrison abruptly, and the boy fled.

Simeon's heart beat a shade faster, for he felt sure that he had found Canales; but his face showed nothing of what was in his mind.

Morrison poured out half tumblers of whisky for himself and his guest, and they drank conventionally, raising their glasses at the same moment, with a slight bow to each other at each gulp; yet in spite of Simeon's boasted capacity for whisky, for his last two swallows Morrison merely raised an empty glass in courtesy. Simeon took careful grip upon himself. He had heard that Morrison could drink two bottles of whisky and then eat a heavy dinner and turn to drinking again. He must not

allow himself to be soaked into helplessness or indiscretion.

"I am now an *emigrado*, Don Santiago," said Simeon sadly. "They have taken away the post I held in Olancho, and I cannot return to Honduras. These are bad times, of a truth. With the American marines in Nicaragua and a strong government in Guatemala and El Salvador, an honest revolutionary cannot make a living in these days. I heard that Ferrera was seeking support from you to start a revolution in Honduras, so I came here with the hope of meeting him and joining him. One must fight somewhere."

Morrison drained his tumbler again. He suspected that his visitor was lying, but he did not greatly care. He knew half the revolutionaries between Merida and San José, their price and their negotiability; and he ranked Simeon Lara low in the scale of importance, as a man whose friendship was not of sufficient stability to warrant any expenditure. Simeon was a good fighter when he felt that he had a fair chance of success, but was very likely to sell his post to the enemy at the first suggestion of defeat. There were too many like him. A few drinks of whisky, and perhaps a night's hospitality—that was all he was worth.

For an hour Simeon talked of politics, while Morrison listened, adding only an occasional word to show that he attended. The whisky was finished, and Morrison called again:

"Bwai, bring a nex' pint come."

The negro boy trotted out with another bottle, and the slow clink of glasses continued. Then a man stepped out of a window at the end of the veranda and came toward them.

Simeon sprang to his feet.

"Don Gilberto!" he exclaimed with well-feigned surprise.

Gilberto Canales, the hope of the Conservative party of Olancho, was a yellow-skinned Indian of medium height and sturdy build. His face held an expression half of good humor, half of animal fierceness. His left eye had a way of wandering off disconcertingly by itself, so that one could not be quite sure whom he was watching. He seated himself at Morrison's right and poured himself out a stiff drink.

Seeing the eagerness with which Canales gulped down the fiery liquid, Simeon re-

joiced. For Don Gilberto's benefit he repeated his story, although he felt sure that Canales had been eavesdropping ever since his arrival. The revolutionary nodded indifferently and turned to the subject of chicle cultivation. It was evident that he was in no hurry to recruit Simeon for his army.

"May I stay the night, Don Santiago?" asked Simeon. "To-morrow I shall go on to Belize."

Morrison nodded.

"Sam!" he shouted. A tall negro shuffled to the door. "Sam, make up a room fe dis gentleman. When you finish done, come so show 'e whe' it deh."

The negro bowed and withdrew. Morrison poured out another drink.

"Salud!" he said, and the others raised their glasses.

The negro butler reappeared and conducted Simeon to his room. Canales looked up at Morrison, his brown, Indian eyes questioning.

"Take care," warned Morrison quietly. "He is a snake. He came in search of you. I saw it in his eyes when you came out. Say not a word about your project. I cannot turn him out to-night, but to-morrow he shall go."

Canales nodded cunningly. His eyes were bloodshot and his speech was becoming thick.

Presently Simeon returned, and dinner was announced. The three men took their seats around the lamp-lit, white-clothed table, and the butler and a barefooted negress served them. Once or twice Morrison's brown-skinned wife appeared in the doorway of the pantry, saw that the service proceeded well, and slipped out of sight again.

The meal of *tipascuite* meat, yams, plantains, and stewed guavas was cleared away, and the men returned to their glasses and a third bottle of whisky. With each drink Morrison became more taciturn and Canales more expansive. Simeon felt himself slipping, but he threw all his will power into the effort to hold his self-control. The whisky thrilled in his veins, burned in his cheeks, and blurred his vision. Through his foggy mind penetrated the words in Canales's muddy voice:

"When I reach Puerto Alvarado I shall have—"

Then Morrison's heavy foot, seeking Canales's toe, encountered Simeon's shin,

and the speech was cut short, while Simeon's consciousness cleared again.

Canales was rocking in his chair, staring around him without understanding why he had been prevented from giving vent to the thought that tumbled into his head. His lips moved vaguely in an attempt to recapture the words he had been about to speak. Morrison, his gray eyes glazed and stupid, picked up the fifth whisky bottle with uncertain fingers, and poured out another drink. Simeon noticed that he filled Don Gilberto's glass to the brim.

"Drink," said Morrison, holding up his glass. "Salud!"

He stared over his tumbler at Canales, who gulped greedily. The three men set down their glasses empty.

There was a dead silence while Morrison watched the brown face of Canales, who panted painfully, his eyes wide, his mouth still working aimlessly. He heaved himself to his feet, overturning his chair, groped in the air around him with feeble, searching hands, and then dropped heavily to the floor.

Morrison stared at the unconscious man with an expressionless, drooping face that showed no sign of triumph at his success in silencing his talkative partner.

"Sam!" he shouted thickly. Again the tall negro padded out. "Carry de gentleman go ah him bed," Morrison ordered, gesturing toward Canales.

Simeon saw his opportunity. He collected his self-control, climbed to his unsteady feet, stooped, put his arms around the drunken man's chest, and gestured to the negro to lift his legs. Together they carried the revolutionary to his bed.

"Sam!" shouted Morrison's voice behind them, and the negro turned away to obey.

With fumbling hands Simeon opened his pocket knife and slit the arteries of the unconscious man's throat.

III

CANALES did not awaken, but he stirred uneasily and raised a heavy arm, which fell again limply to his side. Blood spurted out, black in the dim light, on the sheets and pillowcase. Simeon tiptoed to the door and closed it behind him, just as Sam returned with a bunch of keys. The negro locked the door and followed Simeon back to the veranda.

"Sleep well, Don Simeon," said Morri-

son stupidly. "Carry him go ah him room, Sam, so come back."

Simeon moved around his room, making his boots sound noisily on the bare hard-wood floor; but his attentive ears heard a key turn in the lock behind him. Then Morrison's heavy, shuffling step crossed the hall on the way to his own room.

Simeon blew out his light, slit a triangular hole in the window screen, and slipped out, dropping silently to the grass below. In the shadow of a hibiscus hedge he crept toward the front gate, which shone white in the light from the veranda. In a moment, he knew, the watchdogs would be released. If they found him in the garden, there would be no hope of escape. In any case, they would soon smell the blood inside the house and would rouse the dead with their clamor.

He stopped, frozen in his tracks, as Sam appeared again upon the veranda and came to the screen door. The negro was locking up. He picked up the lamp, and as he moved away the long shadows of the bushes danced weirdly across the grass. Then all was left to the light of the moon. Simeon opened the gate and slipped out, closing it carefully behind him. Then he shambled away down the road to the lagoon.

The drunkenness seemed to have cleared from his brain, and now he thought clearly. He had forgotten to find out where his Caribs had found shelter. The village was asleep, and he must arouse it if he would find them. No! Better leave them and go alone. It was not yet midnight. By dawn he could be out of sight of land, perhaps even in the safety of Honduras.

The moon was high, and the dogs were barking persistently. Now they were answered by the deep voices of Morrison's watchdogs on the hill. As Simeon strode up the moon-white strip of sand on which the dugout canoes lay, casting narrow inky-black shadows, the clamor of the dogs centered around him; but the sleeping folk in the houses did not stir.

Simeon passed from porch to porch until he found what he sought—a paddle left carelessly beside the door. He picked this up, and, choosing a small canoe, he thrust it down the sloping sand into the smooth, warm water. Then, climbing into it, he paddled for the mouth of the lagoon.

On the hilltop one of the watchdogs began to howl, at first plaintively, then with

a note of increasing excitement and terror. Simeon imagined the dogs creeping under the house and sniffing at the slow drops that must now be making their way through the cracks of the floor.

The canoe bounced and rocked as Simeon drove it awkwardly through the hissing waves that surged over the lagoon bar; but he kept its nose straight out to sea until he was in the smooth, rocking rollers two hundred yards from land. Then he turned southward and paddled steadily, though slowly, along the dark coast line.

The waxing moon was already sinking to the hills, but the gleaming stars brightened the sky, while in the water winking stars of phosphorus lightened the darkness of the waves. Simeon could not yet see the Southern Cross, but behind him he made out the Great Bear, low above the northern horizon. He could not mistake his course on a night like this.

For three hours he paddled southward, until he found what he sought—a long point that jutted out into the sea. Now he turned the bow of the canoe eastward and struck out into the open sea. He was at the entrance of the Gulf of Honduras, where British Honduras, Guatemala, and Honduras meet. By cutting straight across the bay he would, in two hours, be out of sight of land, and in six hours he would reach the coast of Honduras.

The phosphorus winked merrily along the sides of his canoe, and he laughed aloud in sheer joy at the thought of the *comandancia* of Ojelota and three thousand *pesos* so easily won. He turned as the moon sank, and had a last glimpse of trees silhouetted against the light, and then the coast of the British colony was gone. Now he was safe from pursuit. In the morning he would be in his own country.

A great sleepiness came over him, and he dozed as he paddled, waking to find that he had lost time by going in a circle. He tried to shake off his weariness, which he knew to be the reaction from the whisky that he had drunk within the last hours. If only he had more whisky now! His mouth was sour and dry, and his abused stomach writhed unhappily inside him. He scooped up a mouthful of salt water in his hand and swallowed it, and found relief in a paralyzing attack of vomiting.

Feeling better, he looked around him. It must be nearly dawn, but he had no means of knowing exactly. He picked up

the paddle and drove it into the water. It struck something firm, and the canoe rocked violently with the unexpected jar, which threw him out of balance. He saw a line of winking phosphorus slip silently past the canoe, and his sleepy drunkenness passed into an appalling clarity. This was a shark, and a large one.

Simeon drove the canoe forward frantically. A shark was too common a creature to be terrifying in itself, but he felt a horror at being alone with this creature on the dark sea. He must go forward and reach the coast as soon as possible. Behind him lay the vengeance of outraged law, so he could not turn back. Before him the stars were beginning to fade in the pallor of dawn. The shark had not left him, and from time to time the line of winking lights circled around the canoe and wandered off again. He could even hear the faint whisper of water against the creature's dorsal fin when it rose to the surface near him. Then the canoe shivered and rasped as the shark slid under it, rubbing his back against the smooth, mahogany bottom.

In the east the sky lighted to a paler blue, and lines of pinkish light rayed outward across the heavens from the center of the still hidden sun. The sea became grayer, for the rising mists hung over the water in a thin white veil.

Again the canoe shivered as the great shark scraped it with a tentative side. Now Simeon could see a shadow in the water beside him, and he shrieked aloud with terror, for the shark was a monster, double the length of his nine-foot canoe.

Before him the light of the rising sun outlined the blue peaks of the great mountains of Honduras, and he paddled on des-

perately. Other fins cut the water near him, and he knew that the great shark was but one of many. He drew his revolver and laid it in his lap while he paddled, his mouth open, his breath coming in quivering, uneven gasps.

Again the shark lounged up to the surface near him, and watched him with eyes of cold understanding that reminded him of the eyes of James Morrison. He fired his revolver at it, but the bullet was deflected from the surface of the water and struck the gunwale of the canoe, while the shark lounged on undisturbed. To Simeon it seemed that the water was full of menacing fins that tortured his imagination. His wind was failing, and his paddling became feebler and feeble.

A third time the great shark rubbed the bottom of the canoe. As it moved away, Simeon followed it with staring, horrified eyes. The fin slid off to the distance of a few yards, turned, sank, and then, like the shadow of a passing bird, the dark patch in the water rushed swiftly toward him.

With a shriek Simeon tried to turn the canoe. The shark turned, too, and its huge body rose into the air. Simeon snatched up his revolver and fired once. Then the gigantic bulk fell upon the canoe, splintering the gunwales, driving the frail shell deep into the sea.

The black fins closed in swiftly, the water was reddened for a moment, and then the fins swam apart, sank into the waves, and disappeared. Nothing was left on the surface of the sea but a drifting paddle and a battered, overturned canoe, which shivered and heaved as a huge shark, a black shadow in the water, rubbed his side contemplatively along its gunwale.

STILL MARCH THE STARS

My feet are on the pavèn street—
The city's flowerless sod—
Yet overhead still march the stars
Those endless hosts of God!

The Milky Way, an Arrow aimed
Athwart infinity,
The great Plow furrowing the north,
Still lift the dream in me.

Orion wading up the south,
The Pleiades, the Crown—
Each night I see the ancient stars
Despite the flaming town!

Harry Kemp

The Girl Who Was Not Wanted

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A STORY OF THE DESERT LANDS
OF THE MOAPA, WHERE THE SUNSETS FLAMED IN GOLD
AND PURPLE, AND ROMANCE BLOSSOMED LIKE THE
SHORT-LIVED FLOWERS OF THE SUNNY SANDS

By Kenneth B. Clarke

MARNA carried a tub of soapy water through the doorway and emptied it beside the path to the pump house. A dozen scrawny hens ran forward, crowding excitedly, and examined the splashed ground in stupid disappointment. With a deadened gesture of dreariness the girl lifted her hair from her eyes and looked off beyond the yard to the valley.

At dawn, and just before the brief twilight, the Moapa Valley is an expanse of splendor, for its folded hills and shelving plateaus are velvety and superbly hued. Under a high sun, as Marna viewed it then, it is harsh, abhorrent. Scouring blasts of wind-driven sand etch away all that is soft in that country, and there is stark unloveliness in all that survives. The flats of Solomon's Sink are coated with an abominable incrustation, and a noisome breath rises from their discolored surfaces.

Incredibly little in the great basin stood the pump house, built to tank water from the underground stream of the Moapa for the railroad spur running to the Elliston mines. Beside it were the tank and a cabin; within the rim of the dusty horizon no other house.

The mining company would preferably have had a hardier man to tend pump on its line across that pitiless reach, but the tender they had was Adam Scoder. His frail daughter could not stand life in the desert, and had mustered the courage to decide that she would not.

Marna turned the tub over a post to

drain, and returned to the room that was kitchen and all else of the cabin, save two bedrooms. She wiped the oilcloth cover of the table over and over in the same spot, her gaze directed through the doorway to the desolation beyond. An appalling stillness was upon the land. Only the monotonous exhaust from the pump strove against it, snuffling, coughing, as if racked with weariness.

Marna's back was turned to Scoder, who sat with lank crossed legs and bent shoulders, staring absently and swinging a loosely suspended foot. All through the morning she had avoided meeting her father's eyes, nerving herself to speak out. There would be opposition, querulous, possibly strident. Of his nagging petulance she had become careless; her dread was that he might plead his dependence and play upon her sympathies.

"I'm going away, dad," she announced, and stood waiting, with her hands pressed hard upon the table.

"Hey?"

Scoder cupped a hand behind one ear and looked up at her, with his mouth open to assist in hearing. It was habitual with him to reply "Hey?" whether he heard clearly or not.

"The hush, until the wind comes up—and then the wind, and then the hush again; and all the time that pump!" Marna was voicing impressions she knew he could not comprehend. She spoke in a stricken whisper. Then loudly: "I can't stay on here, dad, any longer. I've got to

get where there's people. I'm going back!"

Now it would come. If only he wouldn't try to make her sorry for him!

"Be ye? Want to go back to Olanche—want to get where there's people?" Tolerant contempt was in Scoder's tone. "Ain't fergot, have ye, how dumb glad you was to get away from the people in Olanche? Want to go back to that eatin' house counter, an' have ol' Hanlon's woman hollerin' at ye, an' the other girls puttin' ye down?"

This was true. She had been glad to leave Olanche—glad to come to Solomon's Sink; but then she hadn't known what it would be like here.

"Smartest thing you kin do is settle into the job you got right here, an' quit mopin' around."

Evidently Scoder was not taking her announcement seriously. She wished that he would understand how fully she had determined to leave; but at least she had told him what she was going to do, and now it wouldn't be like running away. Anyway, he hadn't made her sorry.

"Wantin' to go back to Olanche!" An amusing thought stirred Scoder's primitive wit. "Think maybe you'll ketch a husband out o' that mess o' miners an' cow-punchers?" he inquired, snickering derisively.

Indignation flashed briefly in Marna's eyes, and her stooped shoulders flattened back. The taunt bit deep, beyond any comprehension of the man. She did think of getting married; not in studied calculation, but in the way of a stalking fear that it might never be. There was no particular man; there never had been one. That was the sting of Scoder's ridicule and of her own tormenting doubt.

Not that woman's married state promised happiness. As seen on the homesteads and small ranches about Olanche, wretchedness was the rule—unpainted shacks, lines of wash, clinging children, isolation; but at least the married ones had been wanted!

At Olanche, Marna had been overlooked, as a Mariposa lily oddly cast upon the desert blooms unnoticed in a clump of mesquite. Olanche liked deep-bosomed women with robust arms and legs. The shy, hesitant, wistful smile in Marna's eyes was unappreciated. Olanche liked eyes that gave back boldly.

Unwanted? It couldn't be true—it couldn't be! At the lunch counter the one who would want you might drop in suddenly. At any time the ringing jingle of spurs along the plank sidewalk, the slam of the screen door, might herald his coming.

Scoder dabbed at his eyes with a bandanna handkerchief and laughed in a high cackle. The humor of his suggestion grew upon him, and seemed to justify enlargement.

"Marny Scoder goin' to snaggle a man! Why, you couldn't git—" He choked, and pounded his chest to loosen the breath that tripped in his throat. "You couldn't even git Loup Latour to ask ye!"

And she had been fearing that her father would try to make her sorry for him! Loup Latour!

Latour came that afternoon, appearing suddenly from the vast emptiness of the valley, as he always did, without any apparent approach. He came to buy, by secret arrangement with Scoder, bacon and flour and coffee from the supplies the company furnished its pump men. All Latour's arrangements were secret. He lived secretly, like a burrowing animal, in a dug-out of which not even Scoder knew the location; but he laid down cash money for food. Scoder was agreeable, even concerned, in the matter of keeping the man's presence undiscovered by the company. He also left uninvestigated Latour's reasons for retirement.

Putting the supplies into a flour sack and counting out the money, Latour gave Marna no more attention than he gave the potted geraniums in cans on the window ledge. As he started to leave, she smiled at him and asked him to stay for supper. Even then his interest was in the prospect of home-cooked food.

Not until Marna appeared in a freshly ironed gingham dress, and lightly brushed her skirt against him in passing to set the table, did Latour rouse to the consciousness of faint allurement in the girl's presence. He noticed that she wore neat slippers, and recalled a former impression of shabby, overrun shoes. He also saw that she wore a bracelet, and that her arm creased in a soft, curving fold at the elbow.

"It's funny, setting up for three," she said, jingling the bracelet as she lifted a hand to touch her hair with light, exploring fingers.

She had seen Mame and Ethel do that at Hanlon's lunch counter, with effect.

No response occurred to Latour. He grinned in doltish confusion and twined one foot about a leg of his tilted chair.

When the men were seated, Marna brought plates. In placing one before Latour she paused beside him, again in the manner of Mame and Ethel, and reached across him to straighten knife and spoon. Again there came to him a disquieting sense of enticement in the girl. His glance swept her smooth, slender arm and lifted covertly to the averted face bent above him. A dull flush betrayed the fact that she was not unaware of her slight contact with his shoulder.

From that moment Latour watched her steadily, with an encouraging leer each time her gaze wavered toward him. Once he closed his hand over hers beneath a dish that she passed, and pressed it. There was no response that he could detect, but neither was there repulse.

When she cleared the table and went to bring the cookies and canned peaches, he waited with an arm lolling along the back of his chair; and as she stepped at last to his side he drew the arm about her and jostled her clumsily against himself. Holding her loosely, he gave a low chuckle intended to be ingratiating, and awaited developments.

Marna looked toward Scoder with a challenging smile of assurance. Here was proof for him! Elation fairly sparkled in her bright glance, and there was disdain in the tilt of her chin; but Scoder was unheeding. Bent closely over his dish, he was feeding greedily.

Presently the touch of venturing fingers fondling her brought Marna back sharply. With an involuntary little shudder of revulsion, she escaped quickly to her side of the table.

The girl's agitation, the quiver of the firm, slight body under his touch, dispelled Latour's remaining doubt. He glanced at Adam Scoder in crafty speculation, estimating the father as a possible factor of interference. Scoder was mashing a cookie in the peach juice with his spoon, and either had not noticed or was indifferent. Latour promptly dismissed the old man as negligible, and his attention returned to the girl.

Revolted at continuing, but dreading to fail in accomplishing her purpose, Marna

was eager to soothe what might be Latour's vexation. Her father's taunt had been that she couldn't get their only neighbor to ask her. He hadn't done that yet—he hadn't asked her. She met the man's gaze with a smile, in faltering imitation of the saucy boldness of Mame and Ethel.

"It's funny, sitting down with three," she said, remembering too late that she said about the same thing before, and realizing that with the exception of those two remarks no word had been spoken throughout the awkward meal. "I mean—" she corrected, and stopped.

The effort to make a cordial reference to his being with them seemed beyond her; but Latour took up the thought.

"You mean," he prompted, with a trace of Canuck accent—"you mean it's funny t'ing havin' feller?"

Again the chuckle fluttered softly. He reached over and picked with a finger at the bracelet on her arm.

"I tell you what's mak' dees funny," he said. "All de tam' you here alone, no feller—an' all de tam' dere's me!"

His fingers closed about her bracelet and her wrist in a slow constriction, and he leaned toward her across the table. Scoder glanced up in stupid wonder.

"Don't know what's de matter I never find you out befor'," Latour declared; "but dat's all finished. I find you now, an' you—you don' care, you tak' me?"

She had succeeded. No other meaning than that of an acceptable proposal occurred to her. She had been asked!

Exultant, she sprang to her feet and faced Scoder. Latour, and the fact that the man's question awaited an answer, were forgotten. With a gesture of "There—you see?" she swept her father with a trailing glance and moved toward the open door, where the sunset splendor of Moapa flamed through.

Puzzlement and rage clouded Latour's fatuous expression of expectancy. Hazily he perceived that the girl's encouragement had been some sort of game between her and Scoder, and that of himself there had been no more thought than could be laughed off with a wave of the hand. He rose ominously before her and blocked her passage.

"Mebbe you t'ink no need geev' de answer—lak' feller ask when's goin' have de rain or somet'ing! Mebbe jus' been havin' leetle fon, eh?"

Abruptly he swung toward Scoder, who had caught the intent if not the words of Latour's proposal, and who sat agape at the girl's calm air of triumph and unconcern in so serious an entanglement. Under the man's scowling scrutiny Scoder lifted a hand to his ear.

"Hey?" he asked, as if he had been spoken to.

Satisfied in a moment that the old man could not have had the courage to trifl with him, Latour flung down Scoder's raised hand, and faced the girl again.

"I mak' up de min', me! Better spik what's goin' to be, befor' I mak' up de min' for you, too!"

Marna understood then, and a chill clutch gathered under her heart. She turned, in the first impulse of panic, to the only protection she knew; but in Scoder's abjectness she saw a fear greater than her own. He was edging from his chair, watching Latour with the single thought of getting away from the man, his hand fumbling at his slack mouth.

Delay of the issue which she could not meet, delay by any means, became the girl's instinctive defense.

"To-morrow," she whispered, her voice stricken in the wave of emptiness and faint nausea that swept her. "To-morrow!" She forced a smile from nerveless lips. "Come back to-morrow, and I'll—"

She could not say that she would tell him then. If only he would go away now, she would be gone on the morrow!

Latour took the words as they stood. The whispering, the glance she had given the old man, seemed to suggest that Scoder was an obstacle. Well, time would dispose of that difficulty. He dropped the girl's arm, satisfied.

Slowly Marna walked to her room, fighting the impulse to run. Safely inside, she swung the door shut and turned the crazy wooden button that served as a latch. Holding it pressed down with her hands, she leaned against it, panting.

Scoder, pretending to look through a machinery catalogue, waited in suspense, watching under his arm the long shadow of Latour's figure.

Latour stared contemplatively at Marna's closed door. Then, as if in connected thought, he turned to consideration of Scoder. Taking a match from his pocket, he splintered an end of it and picked his teeth with leisurely thoroughness, while

eying the stooped shoulders and loose frame of the inconsequential father. Finally, without a word, he sauntered out.

II

MARNA flew to packing in senseless haste. It was needless haste, because there was so little to pack and but one way to leave. The ore train, which would be the first to stop for water, would not come down until five o'clock next morning. She left the bureau drawers hanging out and an open telescope bag under foot, and gave up, unnerved, to endure the lagging darkness until dawn should break.

Scoder went to bed at about nine, and a low rumble of snoring speedily followed the creaking of springs as he turned in. He had neglected to turn out the lamp in the front room, and Marna left it burning. The light showing under her door was comforting.

For an hour or longer she sat at her window, watching the stars and measuring the night by their passage across the little squares of cotton netting tacked to the window frame. At length the biting night air of the desert chilled her through, and she put off her dress and shoes and got into bed to keep warm.

She had not been aware of drowsiness; but abruptly, she knew not how long after, she awoke, startled, from a sleep of exhausted tension. There was some one at the cabin door, rapping softly, furtively—at least, she imagined that it was a furtive rap, for her immediate thought was of Latour.

The door was not locked. The caller, whoever he was, had merely to push it open and come in. She remembered her father's rifle, but that hung on a nail behind the door where the man stood, and he might step through before she could reach it. Moreover, there was her open window, if he should come around that way. She felt a prickle of her flesh at the thought of an intruder tearing the flimsy netting and climbing in.

Leaping from bed, she stood at her door, ready for flight in either direction. Scoder snored on, undisturbed.

"Yes?" Marna called out.

It was better to speak while the unknown remained outside than to chance his taking advantage of the silence. In her terror, her call sounded unlike her own voice.

An answer came in the quaint intonation of the cow country—not the jerky dialect of Latour.

"Can I speak with some one, please, ma'am?"

In her relief Marna flung a quilt about her and fairly ran to open the door. A man stood just beyond the ray of light from the doorway, with one hand upon his belt. Seeing the slender girl, empty-handed, clasping the quilt before her, he stepped forward and removed his hat.

"Could you take a man in, ma'am? I got a pardner here, and he's hurt. He cain't ride no farther—cain't stand the joggin'."

It was the first time any man had taken his hat off to Marna. A warm feeling of graciousness at once entered her attitude toward him. He was trail dusty, unshaven, and more than a little bald, and there were signs upon him of an inelegant use of tobacco. Tattered leather chaps dangled about his legs, and at his thigh was a gun in a ruinous holster. He was a disreputable man in every appearance, but a man, nevertheless, with a ready gun, who said "ma'am" very gently, who cared for a friend, and who uncovered to women. He was a very welcome visitor just then.

Marna's sight, momentarily light-blinded, adjusted to the darkness outside, and in the yard she saw two horses standing quietly. On one of them an indistinguishable form slumped loosely.

"Yes, come in," she said.

The man went quickly to the horses, and she heard him say something reassuring to his companion. There was a straining of saddle leather, and a sharp moan of weariness and pain came from the injured man. Then the other returned, carrying him over his shoulder, a limp heap, and trailing a slicker and an empty canteen.

"Where'll you have him, ma'am?"

Marna took up the lamp and led the way to her room. The man gave her the slicker and motioned for her to spread it over the bed. She noticed then that his hand was red and wet as he held it out, and understood the purpose of the oilskin coat.

"He isn't—isn't dying, is he?" she asked.

"Nah, he ain't dyin'," the man answered with gruff heartiness. "Sort o'

blinked out when I lifted him down. He's been creased, and we've been ridin' till he's all in. The joltin' ain't been good for him."

"You undress him," Marna ordered, "and look after him, while I heat some water."

She caught up her clothing and hurried into the front room. When she came back with the hot water, she saw the injured man in her bed and the other squatted on one heel beside him, gently trying to rouse him.

"It's ole Laramie, Kid!" He was tugging at a thumb of the limp hand lying on the blanket, and pleading patiently. "I got to leave you, Kid. Listen to Laramie a minute!" He glanced up at Marna. "Seems like he's all tired out," he remarked, as if speaking of a child that had played too hard.

"You—you aren't going away?" she asked.

"It sure looks low down, I know. That's what I was tryin' to tell him—why I got to go."

The comforting sense of security that the girl had felt in the presence of this rugged, soft-voiced intruder turned to dismay at the thought of losing him—of losing him and being left with his wounded and helpless companion.

"Things is a little bindin', ma'am," Laramie continued. "Theh's a man followin' us."

Until then no suspicion had entered Marna's thought of these strangers. She had imagined them, one the victim of accident, and the other bringing his friend in for help. She stared in bewilderment now.

"Ordinarily and socially he's a good friend of ounr," Laramie explained, inferring Marna's interest in the man who followed them; "but just now he's actin' in his official capacity, and ain't bendin' his neck none. He's sheriff over to Nueces, name of Milt Powers—a right good man. Soon as it's light he'll pick up our trail where he stopped with the dark to-night. I got to move along, keepin' the tracks of two horses showin', an' lead him on past here. You tell the Kid that when he wakes up."

Marna looked mistrustfully at the man in her bed. His face was drawn in lines of exhaustion and obscured by grime. The tawny head was a mass of light hair

stained and dried as it had lain in a damp tousle. His appearance was not in the least engaging.

"What has he done?" she asked.

"Well, to be right candid, ma'am, he killed a man."

Marna gasped. The man spoke as of an inconsiderable peccadillo, like breaking a window.

"The aggravatin' part," Laramie lamented, "is that a whole lot of explainin' ain't goin' to make the circumstances sound reasonable. The only one could have explained was the gent that's dead. That's why the Kid lit out. Now they ain't a court in the country would believe him. It ain't anything he said made *me* believe him."

Laramie turned over the heap of discarded clothing on the floor, picked up the other man's gun, and wrapped the belt about the holster.

"I'm takin' this," he said. "The Kid is quick like, an' might act unreasonable. I aim to get him out; but if he gets took, he ain't to fight. He mustn't have no more against him added to what he's got. If Milt finds him, he's to go along peaceful. You tell him I said so, when he wakes up."

"But I was just going away," Marna cried, suddenly remembering.

She pointed to her packed bag. Again fear closed in, and bewilderment.

"Ain't they some one goin' to be here?" inquired Laramie, indicating the gentle snoring in the next room.

"There's dad, but he wouldn't be any help. It would be better if he didn't know. He scares pretty easy, and he might tell, if any one came. He's sort of deaf. He needn't know."

"If you could stick to the Kid, ma'am —just till I get back! I can maybe lose Milt on the rocky goin', out yonder, and then I'll come back for him. You needn't lie about his bein' here, if Milt asks. You mustn't; but if you could kind of keep him thinkin' the two of us must 'a' went through, it'd sure give the Kid a chance he needs more'n I need salvation."

In the moment of Marna's wavering, Laramie deftly assumed consent.

"It's sure right good of you, ma'am," he said. "You ain't helpin' no bad man. You ought to know the Kid!"

From the door he called back softly:

"Adios!"

And the girl's heart sank as a jingle of bridle chains dropped away into the night.

III

The first glance at the bared chest of the wounded man was alarming. Only the fact that Laramie was then beyond reach prevented Marna from flying after him to bring him back; but the pitiable helplessness of the still figure, the utter dependence now resting in her, compellingly drew her to the task.

When cleaned, the wound itself was found disproportionate to the havoc it had wrought. Marna took heart. Recalling Laramie's assurance, her dread was overcome in the prospect of accomplishing what had seemed at first an impossible undertaking. Her father's medical kit, provided by the railroad company, placed at hand the things needed; and at last there remained only the problem of holding the bandage in place.

Like a baby's, the man's unconscious body yielded to her handling in seeming trustful confidence. To get the binding gauze under one arm and over the other shoulder, she had to raise him slightly; and his head fell against her breast and rested there. So naturally it happened, so still he lay, that he seemed intentionally to have sought there the rest and peace of a tranquil confiding.

She paused in her work and cradled his head on her arm, timidly infolding it. Somehow the still weight of him brought to her a sense of possession, as if in being left to her care he had given himself into her keeping. She rocked gently and pressed him close.

Strangely, it was not this unknown man that she held, but the one who some day would come for her. In fancy she seemed to have bridged the waiting; and for an ecstatic moment she clung to the illusion with fervid intensity.

Reluctantly she released him, and finished winding and taping the binding strip. The look of spent tension in the wounded man's face had given way to a natural relaxation, and his breathing was quiet and deep.

Moistening a bit of cotton, Marna gently sponged from his face the matted hair and the streaked dust. The clean, even tan of his cheeks and the lightened shadows under his eyes showed him to be younger than she had supposed. A rugged force-

fulness marked him, even something of recklessness, but not anything of hardness or malevolence. His features were those of one who would inevitably get into trouble, but might conceivably be rather fine.

She brought her comb and smoothed his damp hair, pressing it softly with her fingers into its natural wave back from the forehead. Then, suddenly, shyness overcame her.

Until that moment she had felt no impression of a personality in the stranger. He had been an abstract being, remote, unindividual. Startlingly, he now appeared to her as a man of flesh and blood. She drew back, abashed at her temerity, breathless at the intimacy of the encounter. Scrambling the kit together, she hurried to the front room, flushed, ashamed.

She kept the fire going in the stove, and after washing the stains from the man's clothing she hung it over a chair to dry, while she cleared up the evidence of a stranger's presence. The water could not be thrown out, for any one to see. She poured it carefully through a crack where a knot had splintered away the edge of a board in the floor. The litter from the bandaging was dropped into the stove.

Her father should find her getting breakfast a little earlier than usual—that would account for the fire. She scanned the room intently, to be sure that nothing had been overlooked.

The heavy wool jacket was slow to dry. Waiting, she turned the lamp low and returned to the doorway of the bedroom, drawn irresistibly. She leaned there, peering at the shadowy blur of the wounded man's face on the pillow.

In imagination she felt again his head against her breast, and marveled that she had dared. A stranger taken in out of the night! But in that moment of rapture there had been no shame, no feeling of wrong. What, she wondered, could have made it seem so right, so real—"sort of as if it had been meant to be"?

The explanation, when it came, stood forth astoundingly clear, as beliefs do in that weird hour just between darkness and the break of day, when, at the change of watch, winging fancies of the night slip over the line and masquerade as reason. She knew, now! Why had she not known at once when her very spirit had cried out in recognition? This *was* the one who was to come!

It was more than a conclusion—it was conviction, assured, absolute. She had been keeping vigil at the bedside, mending the man's jacket. The understanding had come all in an instant, like a revelation, and she had sprung from her chair with her arms outlifted, letting the mackinaw fall from her lap unnoticed.

Dropping to her knees beside him, she lightly touched his face in a marveling, caressing clasp of finger tips. In the ruddy lamplight his color and serenity gave the impression of a study in bronze composed in lines of confident strength—splendid, vital, audacious. Bending close, with an inarticulate little cry, she pressed her lips to his.

Over the Moapa Valley dawn was breaking—the dawn that was to find her in flight. The ore train came down the long grade, rumbling under brakes, and stopped for water. It aroused her, but she had lost all interest in the plan she had made. Even Latour ceased to concern her.

She turned out the lamp and rolled up the cotton window curtain on its stick. Defiantly she gazed off at the dull red glow on the horizon. Following the light over the eastern hills would come the sheriff who was looking for the stranger. Something tigerlike flamed in the girl's eyes, and instinctively she stepped backward toward the bed. He was hers! They should not take him!

IV

BREAKFAST was ready and set back on the stove to keep warm, before Scoder came from his room; but Marna had found other things to do. Daylight revealed a trail of sinister small, dark dots from the outer door to her bedroom; these she scoured out. In the yard before the door hoof prints showed where horses had stood, and about them were tracks of a man's boots, with heels peculiar to the cowman.

Marna was industriously sweeping the dooryard when Scoder appeared. He did not question her. The ways of women in such matters were past understanding.

Scoder went to the pump house directly after breakfast. The stranger was still asleep when Marna came back to him.

For the first time she gave thought to the question how she would appear to him when he awoke. She viewed herself in the

mirror over the washstand, and was appalled at the untidiness of her rumpled gingham dress and the disorder of her hair.

Her better things were in the telescope bag. Hastily she unpacked the best of them—a little white dress without sleeves, like the one the postmistress wore at Olanche, a pair of lavender silk stockings to match the girdle, a string of coral beads, and the bracelet. Also she set out a treasured little bottle of hyacinth perfume.

She laid them in readiness, and was combing her hair at the mirror when she heard voices in the yard. Scoder was making shrill denials about something as another man asked questions in a sharp, insistent tone.

Marna's heart started pounding. She knew who was there without looking, but first she peered through a crack of the door to make sure that it was safe to open. When she appeared at the cabin door, her manner seemed casual, as if she was looking out in mild curiosity.

The man listening to Scoder sat at ease on a black horse. He was tall and formidable-looking. Barely showing above a pocket of his unbuttoned vest was the glint of a badge, and he wore the customary gun belt. Slung from his saddle, a rifle slanted under his knee. His eyes, as he looked up at Marna's approach, were calmly but penetratingly observant.

"You can ask her," Scoder urged, eager to be relieved of the sheriff's attention.

"Did you see two men pass here?"

The gentleness of the man's voice was disconcerting. Marna was aware of a slackening in her readiness to resist him.

"No, I didn't," she answered truthfully.

"Didn't two men stop here?"

"No," she replied, not so truthfully. "One stopped—one went on," she qualified mentally, to justify herself. "At least," she added a little lamely, "I've been up since daybreak, and there hasn't any one come here since then."

"Why did you sweep this yard this morning?"

Marna's resistance tightened sharply.

"I usually do," she answered steadily, "when the chicken scraps start drawing flies."

She thought the man looked at her a little too long and a little too intently.

"Didn't you see horse tracks through the yard?"

"Yes, I saw them."

It would have been senseless, and might have drawn suspicion, to have evaded that question. It would have been better, she now realized, if her admission had come before. It would have been more natural to mention seeing the tracks when denying having seen the men. She felt that the sheriff was waiting for her to make some explanation.

"I didn't think much about them," she said lightly. Then, remembering that Laramie had carried an empty canteen: "Any one coming by here would be heading for water. They'd be riding through the yard to go to the tank."

He looked at her steadily for another long moment, then glanced reflectively at the tank. This explanation sounded fairly reasonable. Slowly he walked his horse over to the pump house, picking up and following the tracks of the two horses where they emerged from the edge of the swept space. Scoder followed him.

Marna stood in the doorway, watching. Her hands were clenched white at her sides upon folds of her dress.

The trail of the two horses led to the railroad tracks and over to the tank. There a man had dismounted and rested a canteen on the moist earth under the hand faucet. The animals had been watered from a bucket. Only one man had left his horse. From there the double trail led away across the white patches of the sink toward the hills flanking the flats on the north.

Marna saw the pursuer fill his own canteen, then mount and set off at a lope, without a backward glance. Scoder disappeared into the pump house. Over the Moapa Valley the spell of silence and stagnation fell again; but into the girl's heart life poured back with a quickening exultation.

As is the habit of men accustomed to sleeping in the open, the wounded stranger waked silently when his sleep was done, instantly alert and wide-eyed. A slight jostle had shaken his bed. His gaze was lifted to the slanted mirror over the washstand, and reflected there he saw an amazing thing. A girl on her knees, with her head bent low before the footboard of the bed, was shedding her dress.

He lay motionless, trying to place himself. Going back to his nocturnal ride, he remembered nothing after being lifted from his horse before a lighted cabin. This,

then, would be the cabin, and the girl must be some one living here. Evidently crowded quarters, and a broad-minded attitude toward the conventions.

Bare shoulders and slender arms worked the dress down over her hips. Then she put on something white; he thought it was a nightgown until she stood up. At the mirror she straightened her girdle, and was touching dabs of perfume to her dress when her eyes met his in the glass.

She turned quickly to face him, the bottle and the stopper held in either hand, and smiled. She stood still for a moment, radiant in the expectation of his response to the ineffable wonder of their meeting.

He regarded her with a level, estimating gaze. Rather pretty, he thought; and, from her evident friendliness, not aware of his little difficulty.

A torment of thirst put aside other considerations. His throat felt baked.

"Could I have a drink of water?" he asked.

Marna went quickly to get it. She was returning to the room with a filled dipper when Scoder stepped in from the yard. He must have been standing just outside the door, for there had been no sound of his approach.

He stopped short, staring in wonder at the girl's dainty dress; but she thought he was staring at the dipper. Swerving toward the windows across the room, as if that had been her object, she poured the water upon the potted geraniums.

Scoder said nothing. He filled a cup with kerosene from a can under the sink, and went out, wondering whether the dress was in preparation for going away, as she had threatened, or whether the little fool was after all making a play at Latour.

When her father was safely back at the pump house, Marna completed her errand. She burst in, a little breathless.

"You'll have to keep quiet when dad comes," she warned. "He's pretty deaf, but you can't tell. He doesn't know you're here, and he mustn't!"

The stranger looked up quickly over the dipper. So she did know, then! And if so, why this concern to keep him under cover?

"Where's Laramie?" he asked.

"He's gone. He took your horse to keep them following the trail away from here."

"He went along—and left me?"

In the Kid's many and diverse associations, loyalty had been found an unsubstantial quality. Only Laramie, the broken old outcast, had kept abiding faith; and now even that one friend had scuttled for cover at the press of jeopardy! A scornful droop parted his lips.

"He left you with me," Marna remarked brightly.

She watched for the light of dawning comprehension to kindle in her man's eyes. Surely he must see why he had been brought to her!

The Kid was not impressed. With a vacant stare he looked right through her, thinking. A fighting partner would have stuck; but why would a runaway drag a led horse? The only object would be to have a rested relay for a final spurt in a pinch. Laramie had left a wounded man afoot to double-cinch his own get-away!

Once again, as invariably in the past when he had put trust in a friend, the Kid found himself on a lone road, with the way made harder by betrayal. He thrust himself up on one elbow and pointed to the door; but as the blanket fell away he saw that he was unclothed, save for the swathing bandages. He examined these curiously, and then drew the blanket up.

"If you'll get out of here," he announced brusquely, "I'll be getting up."

"Please!" she begged, motioning him back. "You must rest until you're stronger. I'll get you a warm drink and something to eat, and maybe you'll sleep again."

Sleep again! With Milt Powers on his trail and Laramie gone with his horse!

The Kid waited until he heard the rattle of the stove as the girl stirred up the fire. Then he heaved himself to the edge of the bed and sat swaying, drawing on his clothes.

The effort left him a little faint. He drove himself to stand, despite the draining weakness in his legs, and braced to the need of getting on alone. His hands dropped instinctively to feel the comfort of a weighted bolt at hip and thigh—and closed empty!

He looked to where his clothes had been piled, and then swiftly surveyed the room. It must be somewhere at hand. Whatever else, Laramie would not take his gun!

He began searching in a fury of desperation, lurching from one support to another, jerking the flimsy curtain of the clothes closet, strewing the contents of the tele-

scope bag, yanking out the drawers of the washstand. Marna heard him; but Scoder came in just then, and between hiding the signs of her cooking and holding the old man's attention, she stood by helpless to better the situation.

Faintly the wounded man's clatter reached Scoder's dulled ears, and he turned wonderingly toward the bedroom. Marna held her breath, momentarily impotent to act. Then she sharply called out something about oil he had spilled on her clean floor, and pointed to the sink. The racketing was stilled abruptly.

The Kid leaned against the door, listening.

Scoder was diverted. He had come to reconnoiter, perplexed by the girl's dubious behavior.

"What you goin' to do about him?" he asked, with Latour in mind.

The Kid's eyes blazed. She had said that the old man didn't know about him, and mustn't know. The treacherous little liar!

"I'll manage somehow," he heard the girl answer. "You were afraid of him last night. You left me to handle him alone then. You'd be afraid again!"

Scoder wilted under her scorn and was silent. In a moment he sauntered out, cowed.

The Kid pondered the meaning of what he had heard, in the light of the girl's unaccountable care of him. She was keen about keeping him quiet. Mustn't get up, she said—better sleep some more! There was something she meant to do that the old boy feared doing; and they had taken away his gun!

He tiptoed unsteadily to the window and peered out, as from a trap. Then in a flash it came to him—the girl was after a probable reward for turning him up. What the father feared was the infuriation which now sent the young man reeling toward the door, to tear them apart with his hands!

The impulsive rush threw him off balance. He staggered and crashed against the bed, as Marna entered with a tray. Hastily putting down the food, she ran to him, frightened, flinging her arms supportingly about him. Together they strained as she made an effort to put him on his feet.

"What have you done with my gun?" he panted.

"No, no, no—you mustn't!" she cried, pressing against him distractedly.

A throbbing was starting up in the wounded shoulder, but with his other arm he thrust her away and snatched one of her wrists in a crushing grip.

"Laramie took your gun," she insisted. "He said you mustn't fight. He said that if they find you you're to give up!"

A hard smile twisted the Kid's lips. The little she cat wasn't even smart about her lying!

"But I'll look out for you," she entreated. "You mustn't get worked up like this. You're all right here." Pleading anxiety trembled in the girl's voice. "I'm taking care of you!"

"Why?" He flung the word at her sharply.

How could he ask why? Sudden confusion sent a flush of color to her cheeks. Slowly her head drooped, and she turned from him in sweetly shy evasion.

To the Kid her avoidance was a condemning admission. The impulse to throttle and maul her flamed irrepressibly. He released her wrist, and his arm encircled her neck in a swift, cruel embrace, crushing the girl's slight body against him.

Limp and yielding she lay in his clasp, wrenching, stifled. She felt sure that at last he knew! She had looked for his awakening response to come with a breaking smile and a glad look in his eyes, or with some suddenly spoken word of delighted amazement; but this must be the man way of it—to see, to know, and then to take with a swoop of fierce possession. He hurt her, but how exquisitely it hurt to be wanted so!

As he relaxed his grasp, she slipped away, palpitating, in a flurry of embarrassment. The tray of food offered a saving diversion. She brought it to him and urged him to eat.

V

MILT POWERS rode the gradual ascent of the hills across the valley with a far-ahead gaze squinted against the reflected glare of a high sun. He was about to pass a thicket of scrub growth when his horse shied, snorting, and faced half about. Before the animal steadied, Powers had the thicket covered. He waited; but neither sound nor movement stirred in the brush.

Investigating cautiously, he discovered a horse lying dead—the Kid's horse—and

a ground squirrel's hole, caved in. A broken leg, and a merciful little hole between the horse's eyes—that much of the story was plain. On the abandoned saddle he found dried stains, telling a part of the story which he wished he had known sooner. A wounded man might have been pressed to advantage by a stiffer pace.

And then, where the trail resumed, he read the story in full.

Presumably the remaining horse was now carrying double. There was a clever confusion of hoofprints and boot marks at the spot where the horse had been mounted. Two men might have stood there; but a fault in the subsequent sign drew his attention. Careful comparison of the back trail with the trail leading forward showed that the prints of Laramie's horse were no deeper, and marked no less spring in the step, in carrying two men than when carrying one.

Milt Powers straightened grimly, mounted, and turned back on the way he had come. There had not been two men for the last fourteen miles. The man he was after was hidden back there at Solomon's Sink!

At the cabin the Kid slept again, as Marna thought he would. His little strength had been expended in his brief fury. Lying down to steady himself, he had dropped off.

Later she brought him hot coffee again, and sat with him as he drank it. There was a simple directness in the girl's prattling talk which was confounding. Her attempt at deception, if it were that, was as artless as a child's. The Kid regarded her attentively over his cup.

With blithe serenity she recounted the part that Laramie was playing, his reasons for hurrying on, and the instructions that he left. She told her patient of the sheriff's coming—how he had questioned her suspiciously, and then had gone away.

If these things were true—and the Kid now bewilderedly believed they were—his theories fell down. Laramie was still pulling for him, and the girl could not be figuring on a reward.

"It's funny, my not wanting to be left with you at first," she confided. "You see, I didn't know then."

The Kid hoped she might presently make clear what it was she knew now.

"I was all ready to go away," she chat-

tered on, "and it meant I couldn't go. If you hadn't come last night, I would have been gone by now, and you might not have found me for ever so long!"

Whatever this babble implied was beyond him. The possibility of failing to find her impressed him as something that could have been endured; but when she told him of Latour, the meaning of the conversation he had overheard was made plain. However, he could not guess her object in fending for him against her father, against the hand of the law, and against all reason.

"I was going to run away on the ore train this morning. I couldn't wait and let him find me when he comes back; but now I'm safe with you!" A joyous peace shone in her eyes, as if in a vision she saw resplendent the chariots of a surrounding host. "Dad was afraid, and wouldn't speak up to him for me; but you would just look at him once, and he wouldn't dare!"

Her motive, at last, stood forth. The Kid put down his cup and thrust the tray back. They all were alike—never giving without getting it back somewhere—always reaching for something! This one would clamp herself to a wounded man fleeing for his life, and drag him to destruction, in order to get herself out of a little jam!

"To-night we'll get away together on the evening ore train."

She spoke as of a plan already worked out in her mind, and was hurrying on to yet other plans for the future, when the Kid interrupted.

"What about this ore train?"

Here was something to be considered. If her idea was any good, he might be able to dispense with any features of it that involved her as an encumbrance.

As unfolded by Marna, the plan seemed feasible. The train would stop for water just after dusk. A little before train time she would engage the old man's attention; and the fugitive was to slip out of the window, circle the cabin, and hide in a culvert a hundred yards up the line from the tank. The train crew would gather forward during the stop, and he could climb aboard unseen. She would be taken down in the cab of the locomotive.

Apparently this was to be only a beginning, for she seemed to entertain a queer notion of their continuing on together after

reaching Olanche. The Kid put all that aside, hardly listening. He would not stay on the train so far as Olanche. Her help in getting away from here was necessary, but from then on he would make a break for it alone.

"So now you must rest," she decided. "It will be hard for you, riding back there on the beams in the cold and the dark. I'll be thinking of you every minute. I'd ride there with you, if I could."

"I'll be all right," the Kid assured her abstractedly.

He rose and peered out at the height of the sun. An eager briskness marked his manner now. He let fall the lifted curtain and faced about, darting a glance of anxious impatience at the encompassing walls.

Marna went quickly to him.

"Please," she said, "rest quietly. I'll watch and keep you safe." She slipped her hand within his shirt, and felt the bandages over. "Maybe this had to happen, to bring you to me; but—" Impulsively her other arm drew about him, and she buried her face against him in a blind, joyous clinging. Then, looking up with brimming eyes, she asked: "You are glad, aren't you? Couldn't you tell me now?"

The Kid's hand fell inertly upon her shoulder, as if to push her from him, and rested there, a pressing weight. He stood dazed, vainly trying to fathom the meaning of the girl's inexplicable behavior. His bewilderment turned to wide-eyed dismay as presently he felt her shaken by slow, heavy sobs; but her lips and eyes were smiling.

Suddenly she thrust herself from him and ran, laughing. Her laughter was more startling than the tears. At the door she turned and threw it open with a sweep of joyous abandonment. Seeing his expression of alarm, she laughed again.

"It's nothing," she cried. "I'm just so—happy!"

VI

SCODER remained at the pump house, tinkering aimlessly. The way the girl had looked at him when first he tried to talk with her still worried him, and he had no heart for another encounter.

Marna sat in the front room, where she could command through the open door a view of the path and of any one approaching. It was pleasant just to do nothing

but rock and dream—to close her eyes and feel again the touch of his hand on her shoulder and the strength of his arm straining about her neck.

After a lapse into drifting reverie she opened her eyes to see the head and shoulders of Latour leaning in at the window. Resting on his elbows, he was looking at her with a grin of pleased amazement.

"Ver' nice t'ing to fin' de gal waitin' for feller!" he remarked appreciatively. "An' put on de pretties' dress, too, eh?"

He withdrew, and started toward the door. When he came in, Marna was standing behind the table. As he sauntered toward her, there was an insinuating assumption in his bearing.

"Where is the ole one?" he asked.

"Dad is out at the pump house. If you want to see him, you'll find him there."

Banter like this was amusing. He laughed softly, and turned to share her little joke. Her resolute expression caught him up sharply.

"You know why I come," he declared. "I come for de answer you don' give las' night. Lak' you say, you tell me to-day. I 'spec' you mak' up de min'?"

"You frightened me last night," Marna told him quietly. "I had to say something. You don't frighten me now. There wasn't anything I had to make up my mind about, and I'll not answer you. Now go away!"

Latour stared at her, weighing this mood of the girl against the encouragement, and even enticement, she had shown the night before. They are like that sometimes, he considered. If persuasion fails, they require to be handled. He circled the table and came toward her with smiling deliberation.

"It seems lak' you makin' fun," he remarked. "What's de reason for sit on de chair all dress' up, rockin' an' waitin', then say go chase myse'f?"

Still smiling, he reached for her arm, and softly closed a hand upon it. Marna did not shrink from his approach, but at his touch she struck down his hand with a sharply audible slap and an indrawn breath of revulsion.

Indistinctly from her bedroom there came a jarring sound of something tipped over. Silence followed.

Latour whirled about. His hand snatched in a futile but significant movement to his side.

"Some one is there!" he whispered hoarsely.

For a moment they stood apart, each watching the door and expecting it to open. Then, as the silence held, Latour cautiously stepped toward the room.

As in a dream of something hideously threatening, when one agonizedly wills one's legs to run and they will not, Marna stood watching him, incapable of movement. However, as the dreamer is released at the instant of ultimate disaster, she found her voice as his hand fell on the latch.

"There's no one there!" she cried out.

Seeing him stop and look back, she laughed a little unsteadily, with an involuntary snapping of tension; but Latour took it for derision. It was a bad slip to have betrayed his uneasiness like that, and he was minded to laugh it off. On the other hand, there might be some one in the girl's room. As he wavered in indecision, Marna edged forward with slow, restrained steps.

"My hairbrush," she explained, "drying on the window sill—the wind blew it down."

She reached him, and quickly her hand grasped his on the latch—a little too quickly. She felt his grip tighten, and frantically tugged at his fingers with both hands.

Instantly sensing his revived suspicion, swift instinct directed her to beguile him away. In desperation she brought to bear the strategy that she had used with such self-disgust on the previous evening. Deftly she turned the wrestling with his fingers into a playful protest.

"You mustn't do that!" she insisted persuasively. "A man doesn't go into a girl's room—until he's told he can!" She dropped her hands from his and drew away in feigned displeasure. "And if you don't look out—"

She succeeded in giving the uncompleted warning a lightly provocative significance. Then, as if expecting pursuit, she turned and ran from him, with a mocking glance backward over her shoulder.

The device was effective. Latour abandoned the door and followed her. They were like that, too, he reflected. Get off the line a minute, and they quick enough hook you back!

With a darting clutch he caught her in his hands and dragged her to him. She

fought fiercely to wrench free, but at last she felt her feet leave the floor, and his wolfish kiss press against her throat.

Apparently satisfied with the turn of affairs, Latour sauntered out. Marna watched him disappear into the pump house. Then she ran to the bedroom.

"Did you hear?" she asked. Shame and the excitement of her recent struggle flushed her.

"Yes, I heard," the Kid replied non-committally.

"I had to do that," Marna pleaded. "I had to get him away. Truly, I've never kissed any one—except you!" She met his slow stare in unfaltering confusion. "I kissed you last night, while you were asleep," she told him in a low voice.

An insistent something in the girl's ingenuous, incredible self-revelation broke through the Kid's distrust. He saw her standing out and apart from his suspicions, with open hands offering him her love full-blown and fragrant and lovely; giving, and quaintly assuming that he responded. It was as if another self of her rose above his spurning and reached out in faith to another and higher self in him. It held him awed and vaguely troubled.

"I'll have to go back and watch," she said. "He'll come again, but maybe not until to-night, and in just a little while we'll be going. If he does come, I'll manage somehow. You mustn't come out—unless you have to."

In the pump house Latour leaned against a stanchion, covertly surveying the place. He picked up from the floor a discarded piece of heavy cable, and worked it in his hands, seemingly idly curious as to its flexibility. Then he tossed it aside on the bench.

The clank and thump of the pump made hearing doubly difficult for Scoder, but by signs Latour indicated a wish for tobacco. Scoder handed across his plug. Pretending to reach for it, Latour grasped the old man's wrist instead.

Scoder grinned uneasily, thinking the fellow intended some rough joke. Latour grinned, too. He jerked Scoder to his feet and drew him over to the tool bench. Taking up the length of cable, he made a loop about the neck of the heavy iron vise bolted to the bench and proceeded to bind Scoder to it, twisting the cable ends about the old fellow's arm. The spring of the

heavy wire locked the knot in a way that would be beyond the old man's strength to undo with his one free hand.

Not until Latour went out of the pump house did Scoder, in his pain and his frightened confusion, realize what was his assailant's purpose. Then something in the old man's soul, held long in bondage to cowardice, was freed. He strained at the cable lashing and cried out:

"Marny! Marny, run! Behind the door, Marny—my gun!"

His voice was drowned in the din of the engine. Latour heard, but knew that the warning could not reach the cabin. He went on stolidly.

Scoder ceased shouting, and in frenzy of apprehension twisted and pulled at the unyielding cable knot. A wrench lying on the floor caught his eye, and by stretching low he found that he could touch it with his foot. Painfully he worked it to him. Then, with the wrench and one hand, he tried ineffectually to loosen the cable knot, and finally, quivering with maddened haste, he started upon the bolts that clamped the vise to the bench.

When Latour stepped into the front room, he found Marna bent over the table, crouching to peer out through the low window. Her face was ashen, and held a look of unutterable dread. She did not notice him. She did not seem to know that he was there. Her attention was held by something outside, beyond the railroad track. Then she screamed—a stifled, strangling cry.

Latour sprang into the shadows of the room and looked out through the door. A man on a black horse was just topping the railroad embankment. A door slammed, and when he looked about Latour saw that Marna had disappeared. He gave no thought to the girl's strange terror. All that concerned him was how to avoid this stranger.

It was too late to get out unseen. He dodged swiftly into the space behind the door, which was opened in against the wall. There, at his back, he felt the pressure of Scoder's rifle. He grasped it, threw the lever once, and held still.

VII

AFTER her first panic-stricken announcement, the Kid paid little attention to the girl's frenzied whispering. Like a cornered panther he moved from door to window,

irresolutely seeking means of defense or a way of escape; but Marna clung to him, and he could not put her off.

"If he comes in," she panted, "I'll hold him until you've had time to get his horse." The Kid regarded her alertly. He had not thought of that. "Slip out through the window when you hear him inside. Then run for his horse, and ride hard!"

The Kid tore away the window netting and looked out at the way he would take; but Marna still clung to him.

"It means we can't go together, as we were going to." Her lips trembled, and her hands reached up and caressed his cheeks. "I'll be at Olanche, waiting. You'll come and find me when you can? You'll come back to me?"

"Sure I'll come back," the Kid agreed in anxious preoccupation.

His head jerked up, listening. Then he dropped a warning hand over her lips. The jingle of a bridle chain and the approaching scuffle of a horse's feet came through the hush.

Marna snatched at his hand, put it against her lips, and pressed it hard with a kiss. At the door she looked back once in parting, and quickly was gone.

Latour, from his hiding place, could hear but could not see the stranger's approach until the man stood at the threshold. The glint of a badge protruding from a pocket struck through the narrow opening at the door jamb, not two feet from him. Latour sharply pulled down his hat brim to cover his face.

"I'll take him now," Powers quietly announced, addressing Marna.

There was in his manner that which ended any thought of delay through denial or evasion. His hand rested lightly at his belt as he stepped through the doorway. His eyes took in the details of the room at a glance.

As he paused momentarily, Marna thought she heard a muffled scrape of boots on gravel at the rear of the cabin. She began speaking hurriedly, inanely, to cover the sound.

"You mustn't take him!" she cried out excitedly. "He isn't bad. You must let him go!"

Powers ignored her. His gaze rested on the door of Scoder's bedroom.

The fact that he looked at the wrong room suggested to Marna a way to gain

a precious minute. As Powers stepped forward, she ran to Scoder's door and set her back against it.

"You can't have him!" she protested shrilly. "You can't! You can't!"

She fought off the sheriff's reaching hand, clawing and striking; but he dragged her away and spun her about with a firmly effectual shove. Drawing his gun, he flung the door back with a driving thrust of his foot.

In the silence, as he stood amazed at the empty room, there came from the blind side of the cabin the sound of spurting gravel and the swift thudding of a horse's hoofs breaking into a run.

"Listen!" Marna called out. Her hand was raised in a gesture of attention, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. "He's safe! That's your horse that's running—and my man!" Hysterically her laugh rang out, and her clenched little hands beat at her breast. "You couldn't take him! He's mine!"

Powers saw her suddenly stilled in that posture, staring at a point behind him. He turned to see the entrance door swing out from the wall, and a man behind it press a rifle to his hip—a man with a face like a mask of malevolence. There was a crashing report, and beside him the girl stood swaying.

Taking Marna first was Latour's undoing. An instantly answering shot stiffened him on his toes, and he tipped back rigid against the wall. Then, buckling at the knees, he came down still and limp.

A troubled, puzzled look came into Marna's eyes as she stood trying to keep her balance and gazing down at a slowly widening spot staining her dress. As Powers caught her and held her up, she looked at him beseechingly through one terribly frightened moment of realization. Then she smiled at him.

"He was mine!" she boasted. "He was coming back for me! He said he would come back!"

VIII

THE menace of the two reports, close together, bent the Kid low over the saddle; but, strangely, there was no sing of bullet passing, no spurt of dust ahead. Milt Powers should do better than that!

Powers's rifle was under the fugitive's knee, and when safely out of pistol range he looked back. There was no sign of any

one at the cabin, no glimpse of Powers at door or window. He swung about to a stand.

As he watched, perplexed, a man came from the pump house, swinging a weight at arm's length, and ran toward the cabin—a bent little man, who ran unsteadily in a manner of frantic anxiety. That would be the girl's father, probably.

Then, as if the walls had opened and he saw within the room, the Kid suddenly visualized the meaning of the two shots. She had said she would hold Powers for him. She had tried—and the man had killed her!

Rage, such as the Kid never had known on his own account, loosed a hot, retributive fury within him. He jerked Powers's rifle free and rode forward.

Marna felt herself gliding downward on waves of restfulness through a great space into a delicious coolness. Presently she found that she went forward without effort on a winding road that she did not touch with her feet, between towering rocks, purple and blue and darkly hazy, not unlike those she once had seen at evening in a pass of the Malamai Hills. At a bend of the road she passed a park of mighty trees and came upon a lake of cool, still water with high purple rocks reflected in it. At once she knew where she was. This was the Valley of the Shadow!

It wasn't frightening, for there ahead, reflected magnificently on the rocks at the next distant bend, shone a flood of light. In a moment she would come to it and be safe.

Milt Powers knelt beside the girl, helpless, waiting, and marveled at a devotion that could go out smiling, with just a memory clasped tight.

Too late he heard a quick step at the open door. He looked up to see the Kid lunge in, and stop. It was too late to draw, for already he was covered; but the Kid's gaze was not on him.

"Did you do that?" the boy asked.

His tone gave the effect of the closing in of something inexorable, terrible. Powers pointed to the motionless figure lying partly behind the door; and as the Kid turned to look, he rose warily.

The invasion of his home by these men, and their unintelligible strife, meant nothing to Scoder. All he knew was that he had reached his daughter too late. He

stood apart, ignored, and, ignoring them, looking down at her. His lips twitched, and abstractedly he tugged at the knotted bit of cable and a dangling iron thing bound to his arm.

There was nothing to do about the body lying behind the door. The Kid realized that this must be the man of whom the girl had told him—the one from whom she had saved him at the cost of a kiss that shamed her. He dropped the rifle, without heed of Powers, and went quickly to the girl's side. The sheriff made a move toward him, but checked himself and stepped back.

Gently the Kid lifted her shoulders, supporting her on his good arm. He bent close, listening. Then he shook his head, as if silently answering his own question. It was comforting, a little, to see that she still smiled faintly. She had gone smiling. He laid her head against him and lightly brushed his chin over her hair.

"I don't know what it is, Milt," he tried to explain, glancing up. "I don't even know her name, and I don't think she knew mine; but she fought for me, Milt! She stood fast against you, and him, and everything. She had an idea we was going along together. And she gave me—"

Something clutched at the Kid's throat and shut off the words. He laid his cheek against hers and softly crushed her to him.

When Marna came to the cañon bend where the glow gilded the rocks, and turned it, she saw great steps leading beautifully up and up to a point where they were lost in a blaze of overpowering splendence; and there was some one waiting to guide her—a dark figure which

THE END

somehow was discernible only as a presence.

But this dark figure barred the way when Marna came, and said:

"Go back! You're wanted back there! Go back!"

Marna heard the voice distinctly, with something of a little shock, and opened her eyes wide; and there, bent over her, she saw the tanned face of the one who wanted her—the one who had come to find her. He was holding her in his arms, very close, and looking up at some one who stood over him—the man who had come on the black horse.

But the man's hand rested in a friendly way on her man's shoulder. Undoubtedly he was a very good friend, as Laramie said he was.

It was Powers who had spoken. What he had said was:

"I'm sorry, Ed. You're wanted back there."

He went on talking, but Marna paid little attention. It was very good just to lie there with her man's arm about her.

"You were a damned fool to run," Powers remarked. "Naturally I had to bring you back, and you've got to stand trial. It's true you haven't a witness, and folks know you long ago offered to kill Burch; but God A'mighty! You've got that hole through you, and between a dead man and a wounded one it don't stand to reason the dead one done his shooting after the other one—"

Powers stopped short. His glance had inadvertently dropped to the girl's face. He saw her looking up at him with a disinterested smile of utter contentment.

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "Look!"

PINES

With prideful stare the pines point high;
Blue-gloom their sheltered sighs;
In idle mood they scorn the wind,
Then, steal a snow disguise.

Their lazy leaflings stay to pierce
The simple fern and grass;
And shabbily they cling to rust
With old-new leaves en masse.

A staunch old aristocracy—
This stern borean clan:
They linger—they, the trusty guides
To royal pride in man.

Phyllis Moore

“Love Nests Must Go!”

A REALISTIC STORY OF THE “NEWER JOURNALISM” OF TODAY, BEING A HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED CHAPTER
OF THE SENSATIONAL ROLLY CASE

By Richard Howells Watkins

“**I**F you take my advice, Chris, you won’t,” said James Trevelyan Travis, leaning forward across his glass-topped desk to emphasize his earnestness. For the time he dropped the air of detached omniscience that was his principal business asset. “Times aren’t the only things that have changed in the newspaper business,” he added.

Chris Stockton, his caller, had been engaged in apple farming in northern New York State for the past five years. Despite that hiatus in his career, he could still have been spotted as a newspaper man at a hundred yards by one of his own calling. It was not that his clothes had been thoroughly worn, or that his brown eyes were knowing, or that his attitude was one of passive observation. He looked like a newspaper man—that was all.

There are, of course, fat newspaper men and long, thin newspaper men. There are also prosperous-looking newspaper men with canes, and seedy newspaper men without so much as an umbrella. In fact, a newspaper man may present almost any appearance to the general public; but despite all superficialities, he will still look like a newspaper man, and like nothing else, to others of his breed.

At this moment, facing Travis’s warning, Chris was argumentative—an unusual state of mind for him.

“Jim, a story is still a story, and a reporter is still a reporter,” he declared. “Of course I know that nowadays a story may also be a picture, and a reporter may also be a photographer, but I guess I can learn to click a camera on the side, if I have to.”

Jim Travis shook his head. He started to speak, but checked the impulse and

continued to shake his head, vigorously but rather hopelessly.

Chris Stockton pursued his discourse.

“You see, Jim, this year’s crop happened to be an eighty-per-cent failure, so I’ve got to do something to keep a little money rolling in for the family this winter.”

“Why not throw in with me, then, Chris?” Travis said impulsively. “I know how good a newspaper man you were, and five years—or fifty—out in the orchards can’t eradicate that. Mighty glad to have you!”

Chris Stockton’s lean and weather-tanned cheeks colored faintly under the skin. He looked around helplessly, anywhere to avoid the eyes of James Trevelyan Travis. He tried scrutinizing the plate glass top on the mahogany desk, and then the formidable array of gold-lettered volumes in the quiet yet expensive bookcases on the other side of the room; but finally he had to devote himself to the inch-deep pile on the carpet.

Jim Travis let him wriggle for a minute or so, and then laughed, with very little bitterness.

“Say it!” he urged. “I know what I am. It says ‘consultant in public relations’ on the door of my palatial offices, but I know it means ‘press agent’ as well as you do. You’re a newspaper man, you are! You don’t want to sink down to the press agent level, do you?”

“Jim, Jim!” muttered Chris. “You know damned well I don’t think of you as—as anything but an old-timer who worked with me on some rattling good stories; but, you see—newspaper work’s always been my work, and you can’t teach an old news hound new tricks.”

"All right—I won't try to lure you from the straight and narrow path, even if it isn't always as straight as it used to be. You say you can't break into any of our old sheets?"

"That's what I came to see you about," said Chris. His brown forehead crinkled in a recurring frown of perplexity. "They don't know me. Of course, I never expected to find the same managing editors on the job after five years, but—well, I can't crash in, and I've got to get a job."

"Ever hear of the *Pabulum*?" inquired Travis.

"That's one of those—"

"It's an exponent of the newer journalism," said Travis. "Why learn to read when you can look? Well, I can give you a letter to the editor. Yes, I, a lowly press agent, can give you a letter to the biggest thing in the editorial department—one Thomas Jefferson Hollenbocker."

"That's mighty kind of you, Jim, but—"

"Done!" said Travis.

He rang for his secretary and dictated his letter with the fluency of one who has left two-fingered typing of his own stuff years behind him.

"Hollenbocker won't tear it up and throw you out. He'll read it," Travis assured Chris. "Let me know how you make out."

Chris thanked him and departed. Downstairs in the lobby he looked at the letter uncertainly. In his day editors did not receive without violence letters from press agents, asking favors—saving only circus press agents.

II

MR. HOLLOWBOCKER was intrenched like a quartermaster general, but the letter from James Trevelyan Travis saw Chris through.

The man who ran the *Pabulum* did so in an expensively furnished office which, compared to the Grand Central Terminal, was quite small. He was broad in the brow, but still broader in the jowls, with a round, unwrinkled face referred to by his friends as red and by his enemies as maroon. He wore white piping on his waistcoat.

To Chris he did not look like a newspaper man. That, of course, might explain why Travis's letter had been valuable in getting to see him. He ran true to

form, however, in the matter of giving Chris Stockton a job.

"Can't do it," he said tersely. "Mr. Travis is a valued friend of mine, but the town is full of old newspaper men. Any specialty?"

"I've covered about everything but society," Chris answered curtly.

"Old-fashioned reporter, eh?"

Mr. Hollenbocker surveyed Chris as if through a microscope, a man indulgently examining a bug.

"I wouldn't call myself old-fashioned," Stockton objected.

He did not feel like truckling to an outsider like Mr. Hollenbocker, even if he was a managing editor.

"Obsolete!" said the editor of the *Pabulum*. "Archaic! What I need, Mr.—uh—is investigators."

Chris stood up to go.

"I dug up the man who kidnaped the Tenant kid, and I was one of the five men playing poker in the *Star* office the night that Jack Manton shot Winfield Turner," he remarked casually.

"Wait a moment," said the editor hastily. "You were, eh? Mr. Manton still gives us a juicy bit of news now and then. Yes, yes!" He mused for seven-eighths of a second. "Old-fashioned reporter," he mumbled. "What the O. F. reporter saw. How the O. F. reporter saw it. All right!"

A door opened suddenly, and a thin, smiling man entered. To Chris he didn't look like a newspaper man, either.

"Sorry to butt in, chief, but I've got a lad in tow who says he has some Rolly letters that—" he began.

"All right!" Mr. Hollenbocker broke in. "How much does he want, Buck?"

"A thousand," said Buck.

"They all want a thousand!" snarled the editor, somewhat more purple or less red than usual. "I'll bet he wrote 'em himself! Bring him in. It's getting to be a procession. Here! This is Mr."—he consulted Jim Travis's letter—"Mr. Stockton, who's going to do an old-fashioned reporter—"

Mr. Hollenbocker blinked and compressed his lips in decision.

"No, make that 'old-timer,'" he directed. "He's going to do an old-timer feature. Put him on the Rolly case with the others, Buck. 'What the Old-Timer Dug Up About Rolly'—make it juicy. That'll do, Stockton."

"Right, chief!" said Buck.

He took Chris in tow with a flirt of his head, and directed him toward a door.

"Wait!" Hollenbocker twirled a finger imperatively in Chris Stockton's direction. "We're campaigning against love nests this month, Stockton—wiping 'em out—stories and pics—juicier the better—and Rolly fits in fine. Remember that! That'll do, Stockton."

Buck turned the knob and led Chris into a long corridor.

"One fifty!" Mr. Hollenbocker roared after them.

"One fifty it is, chief," replied Buck, and closed the door. "Hundred and fifty a week salary—while it lasts," he translated to Chris. "Wait till I shoot in this guy with the letters, will you?"

He popped through another door. Somewhat faint, Chris leaned against the wall and waited. A hundred and fifty! He had hoped for sixty a week. Each minute this place and these men seemed less journalistic.

Suddenly he cocked his head and listened with appreciation. A fury of typewriters in full cry was sounding through a half open door on the other side of the passage. He looked at his watch. It was not yet four in the afternoon.

"The boys certainly get their stuff in early," he conceded to himself. "Most city rooms are dead until five thirty. Maybe we get out a bulldog."

He moved toward the door whence came the song of the busy typewriters, and peered in. The room was not as large as the city rooms he remembered. Almost all the typists were girls.

"Sob sisters!" he muttered gloomily.

They had been creeping in five years ago, but he had never thought it would come to this.

Buck appeared at his side, and touched his arm.

"Hey, keep away from that room!" he said warningly. "Nobody allowed in there. That's the libel department. Best libel department in town!"

Chris stared at him suspiciously, but Buck showed no signs of suppressed merriment.

"Better get out on your story," he said. "You know the Rolly case, don't you?" He darted an impatient glance at Chris's blank face and hurried on: "Rollert—Jasper S. Rollert. Bird got beaten up this

morning not a hundred feet off Broadway. Know it?"

Chris recalled a paragraph in the morning papers—obviously hurried into the last edition a few minutes before the dead line—about a banker who had been found unconscious on the street. He nodded.

"I didn't know he was nicknamed Rolly," he explained.

Buck emitted a single syllable of laughter.

"Rollert don't fit in a head—too long," he answered. "Rolly does. If that ain't his nickname, it ought to be."

"Am I doing it alone?"

Buck stared at him.

"Yes, you aren't," he answered emphatically. "A rewrite man's covering the rest of the town—giving the news a stick or paragraph—to make room for Rolly. We're giving Rolly a play—canning everything but ads to make room for him. He won't know himself to-morrow morning—if he doesn't die for us to-day. With luck he might. Well, go out and get yours. Broadway stuff. Keep it short and juicy."

He nodded and selected another door to vanish through.

Still rather bewildered, but clinging to the fact that he had his assignment, Chris Stockton started down the corridor, seeking either the city room or an exit.

A heavy hand dropped on his shoulder. An enormous man with hair growing low on his forehead was staring keenly into his face. Chris recognized him as the keeper of the gate, to whom he had first presented Travis's letter.

"Where you going?" the man demanded gruffly.

It was not until Buck, whom the surly giant called Mr. Savin, popped into view again and identified him as a member of the staff that the gateman was satisfied. Then, indignantly, he led the way to the elevators, and Chris descended to the ground floor.

III

In the lobby Chris bought an afternoon paper and looked over the Rollert affair.

There was not a great deal more information there than the morning paper had presented, although the story was given a first page column and jump over. Rollert, a middle-aged banker with an estate on Long Island and an apartment on Park

Avenue, had been found in a much battered state on a side street in the Forties near Broadway. He had been lying on the sidewalk not fifty feet from the stage door of a theater. Robbery, it seemed, was not the motive of the assault, as neither his wallet nor the studs and other jewelry he wore had been touched.

The paper featured the mystery of the attack, and mentioned that the man was married and had two children. He had been taken to the nearest hospital in an ambulance, but later had been removed to a private institution. He was suffering from concussion of the brain, and was still unconscious. The police were investigating.

Chris meditated. There were various methods of approach. There were the hospital people, the policeman who had found Rollert, the detectives who were working on the case—there were sure to be a flock of them—his wife, his office, the theater near which he had been found, and so forth.

He recalled Thomas Jefferson Hollenbocker's instructions to do "old-timer stuff" on the story. He didn't know precisely what this meant, and he had a shrewd idea that Hollenbocker didn't, either. If you hire enough men, one of them may turn out something good.

"I'd better hook up with the gang and get some dope about Rollert," Chris decided. "Where'll they be now?"

He looked at his watch again, and reckoned that by that time the reporters would be rallying at the police station in the Tenderloin to waylay detectives on the case. If he wasted time attempting to cover the other ends of the story, he might miss them. For a belated reporter on an assignment there is always a better chance in joining the crowd than in attempting to do something brilliant on his own.

It was a new station house, Chris found. The lieutenant on desk duty was also new, but he had the same ponderous dignity and the same set cast of countenance as of old. Chris felt at home at once.

Then he looked at the crowd milling around in front of the desk, and felt decidedly less at home. He had never seen a police station so busy. There was an elderly lady with startling red lips; there was a plump, middle-aged, frock-coated person with a reddish spade-shaped beard; there was a tall, thin individual, unmistak-

ably an actor; there was a youngish man wearing an air of profundity and spectacles with lenses three-eighths of an inch thick; there was a host of other interesting people.

Chris felt his thirty-nine years. If these were all complainants, witnesses, defendants out on bail, and the like, then the city had become a faster and far more wicked place than he had known it. Hollenbocker's "old-fashioned" taunt was justified.

His forehead displayed deepening ripple marks of apprehension. Without reason, his heart was dropping downward to rest heavily on his stomach; but suddenly, through the throng, he spied a familiar face. It was the scowling, unlovely countenance of a man who leaned against a brass rail and surveyed the crowd.

"Barney Kinghorn!" Chris muttered, and cleft a way through toward him.

Barney saw him coming. The old detective saw most things. He smiled slightly and extended a hand.

"Well, if it ain't a regular reporter!" he said. "What you doing around here, Chris Stockton?"

"I'm back in harness, Barney. Glad to see you again, even if you aren't any handsomer than usual. How's the family?"

The detective smiled, as a stone image smiles, painfully.

"What you covering?" he asked.

"Rollert case," Chris answered, and looked at him hopefully.

The detective did not smile again. He nodded his head disgustedly at the crowd before the desk.

"So are those," he said.

"They're—they're—" Chris faltered.

Barney nodded somberly.

"Yeah, they're from the papers. Ain't you run into them before?"

"Who are they?" Chris inquired with hostility. "They don't look like newspaper people to me."

"They ain't," said Barney glumly. "They're tabloid specialists, they are—novelists and novelettes, blackmailers, blood stain experts, doctors, preachers, prize fighters, financial authorities, and trick detectives. They're all doing feature stuff on the Rolly case—what they think of it from their slant, y' know. Old-time reporters and old-time detectives are sort of getting squeezed out in this town!"

"It seems so," Chris muttered. "Aren't there any regular reporters left?"

"Yeah, there are some; but where those are"—he jerked his head toward the crowd—"the regulars ain't."

"You on the case, Barney?"

"Does it look like it?" inquired Barney with heavy sarcasm. "Is a couple of scientists sitting on my neck while a lady love novelist goes through my pockets to see have I got any clews? Have all the buttons been tore off my coat? Have my ribs been busted in in the rush?"

Chris did not reply.

"Clews!" Barney growled fiercely to himself. "I'll bet you my shield and gun there's not one in that herd that hasn't planted and discovered about seven clews around where Rollert got beat up. It's too big a job for the police to handle all the clews in one of these popular cases, Stockton. We have to call in the Street Cleaning Department to pick up and cart away all the pink garters and love notes and medieval Eyetalian daggers and phony jewelry that get found around where a guy gets his!"

Chris sensed a certain exaggeration in this, though Barney seemed fiercely sincere.

"This is going to be a tough story to cover," Chris said thoughtfully. "You don't know where I could get a lead on it, do you, Barney?"

Barney waved an irritated hand.

"Go out and help yourself to a beat on it," he said. "These here are so busy developing their own specialties that nobody but a few old-time reporters ever go after the real dope. These here—they all have beats of their own, every day."

"Come on, Barney—loosen up," said Stockton coaxingly. "What do you think of it, even if you aren't on the case?"

"Well, leavin' aside the trysts, love nests, heart balm, and that guff, somebody gave Rollert a good beating up, and Rollert give the other guy or guys something back."

"Yes?" said Chris doubtfully, for doubt always made Barney talk.

"Why?" the detective replied. "Because, when they picked him up, his knuckles were bloody; and Pat O'Shea, the patrolman that found him, picked up a tooth on the pavement that somebody, not Rollert, had been jolted loose from. There's a clew that was there before anybody planted anything. Everybody knows all that, but you see if they don't prove

a chorus girl, or a night club hostess, or one of those things done it, to-morrow morning! I'll bet you at least three papers will have a picture and confession by the girl in the case, and it won't be the same girl in any of 'em!"

"Is Rollert going to die?"

"If they don't keep to-morrow's papers away from him in that little private hospital dump, he'll croak sure," Barney averred. "Also there's always the chance a photographer will do a human fly stunt up the wall and cut his throat, to get an exclusive picture of the corpse. Aside from that, he's just bruised and knocked cold."

"Did Rollert go rolling around the Tenderloin much?"

"As far as I know, he never saw a chorus lady nearer than the tenth row in the orchestra," Barney answered.

"Who did it, Barney?"

"Damned if I know." The detective scratched his chin, as if to entice an idea from it. "They left him his wad. If it wasn't for his knuckles and that tooth, I'd say a taxi hit him."

Chris Stockton considered this. Obviously Barney had no inside information.

"How about my running down to headquarters and seeing the inspector in charge of the Broadway squad, Barney?" he asked. "Do you think I could pick up something there?"

"He'd probly tell you the police was working on the case," said the disgruntled detective. "Then, if you asked him another question, he'd offer to do you a feature on it for a thousand, him to keep the moving picture rights. Everybody's writing for 'em now but the reporters. What paper you on?"

"The *Pabulum*," said Chris.

"The *Pabulum!*" said Barney incredulously. He looked intently at Chris's face. "Oh, hell!" he said, with contempt, and, spinning around, he walked rapidly away.

"Barney doesn't seem to like my paper," Chris said.

Thus deserted by his only friend, he left the police station. If the police knew nothing about it, he need not worry about unofficial theories. Besides, it was time to get his story in. To-morrow he could really work on the case.

"Old-timer, eh?" he murmured. "I'll dish up a rewrite of a few good Broadway murders and point out that murders aren't what they used to be. Rollert's going to

live—this story's a flop—he isn't even badly hurt—"

He strode along briskly, mapping out his story.

IV

BACK in the *Pabulum* office Buck Savin—who, Chris discovered, was the city editor—jumped on his neck for early copy, and told him to keep it short and juicy. The city room was almost deserted, and Chris, learning that the paper had four specialists, a revivalist, a society lady, a movie actress, and a night club doorman covering the story besides the staff, divined that much copy was written elsewhere. He batted out three-quarters of a column—an old-time column—on his theme that Broadway murders weren't what they used to be, and took it to Buck, who hadn't gone home. Buck was busy slashing some copy, and gave Chris a curt good night without raising his head.

Chris had expected to be held on a wait at the office until midnight, at least; but times had changed. He strolled luxuriously out of the office, receiving with a genial smile the suspicious scowl of another gigantic keeper of the gate.

He felt that this was going to be the easiest hundred and fifty dollars a week that he had ever made. At six days a week he had already earned twenty-five dollars. In the days of space rates he would have had to write three and a half columns of good stuff for that much.

Next morning at breakfast, in a quick lunch around the corner from his furnished room, he read with rising apprehension that part of the *Pabulum* which required reading.

The *Pabulum*, so the paper admitted, had beaten the town on the Rolly case, but it was not through Chris's story. On the front page, next to a "reconstructed" picture of the crime, was a very legible letter signed "Rolly," and over both was a streamer—"ROLLY LOVE VICTIM."

Hastily Chris whisked through the pages, skipping the product of the specialists and looking for his own stuff. On the fourth page he found five lines of it, deep in a story which began:

Is Rolly really hurt, or is he in hiding from further love vengeance?

The story developed the theme that Rolly had taken refuge in the hospital

from some justly incensed lady or righteously wrathful husband who wanted another whack at him. Apparently it was based upon Chris's information that the banker was not badly hurt.

On the editorial page was an emphatic dissertation upon the necessity for sweeping love nests from the city, pointing out that they led to such public disorders as the infamous Rolly case, and condemning them not only as immoral, but as subversive of the best interests of the community, since they were luxuries beyond the reach of the common people. There was also a historical account of love nests, as dug up from divorce court testimony and still less fragrant sources.

Chris, with a hollow feeling, went early to the office. Trouble began at the door, where he was again held up by the huge doorman with a jaw and the general appearance of Barney Kinghorn.

"Maybe you are on the staff, brother, but how do I know you aren't trying to get in to slug the boss or sell him something?" demanded the keeper of the gate. "We got new ones on the staff every day—I don't keep track of 'em."

Again Chris was identified and rescued by Buck Savin.

"The chief wants to see you," said Buck curtly. "Come ahead in."

He led the way to Thomas Jefferson Hollenbocker's private office, introduced Chris into the presence, and disappeared.

Mr. Hollenbocker, looking less like a newspaper man than ever, glowered at Chris over his desk.

"I've got your copy here, young man," he rumbled. "What do you mean by writing such preposterous rubbish?"

"It didn't seem like rubbish to me," said Chris mildly.

"Ridiculous! Asinine! And dull—dull!" roared the editor. His jowls quivered. "You even intimate that you doubt if there's a love motive back of it all. What do you mean by that? Do you think you know how to run this paper better than I do?"

It did not seem politic to answer this last question in the affirmative, so Chris was silent. Mr. Hollenbocker got up from his desk, leveled a finger at Chris, and then tapped him emphatically upon the breastbone with it.

"You get out on this story, and you dig to support the policy of your paper! Love

nests must go! Broadway is worse than it ever was before!"

It was not the pressure of Mr. Hollenbocker's finger, but rather the pressure of economic facts that made Chris say:

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

Mr. Hollenbocker stared indignantly at him, but slowly his purple hue faded back into red.

"There's only one thing, Stockton, in all this pish that makes me think you may be worth keeping on the staff. That's the fact that you advanced the suggestion that Rolly was not seriously injured. To a thinking man like Buck Savin that meant something!"

"I—" said Chris, but the editor was still talking.

"If Rolly doesn't die to-day, we may have to play up further his cowering in a well guarded hospital to escape from other murderous though perhaps justifiable attacks. Not in his love nest is Rolly safe now, not in the bosom of his family, not in his spacious offices, but in a barred and detective-guarded sanctuary, where fawning medical men bow to his wish to be secluded from public wrath and private vengeance. You get the idea?" He flung a hand to the door. "Get going!"

Chris rid himself of the man by walking out of the office. Hot anger surged in his brain and made his collar tight on his neck. He had been accustomed to managing editors who were known by their first names to most of the staff. Resignation was too soft an answer to this fellow.

"I'd like to show him!" he muttered. "Love nests be damned!"

V

ONCE on the street again, he bought an armful of morning papers and looked over them all. They were divided into two camps—the papers that alluded to the injured man as "Rolly" and ascribed lurid motives to his assailant, and those that printed a straight news story, describing the unsuccessful researches of the police.

In the former class the *Pabulum* led the field, but not by much. One rival paper carried three plausible solutions of the crime, but the chorus was always the same—"Cherchez la femme!"

All that Detective Kinghorn had gloomily predicted, it seemed, had come to pass. Any reputation that Jasper S. Rollert may have had for sobriety, monogyny, and al-

lied virtues was successfully dissipated in picture and story. Several papers gave indications of envious jealousy concerning the *Pabulum's* campaign against love nests and the manner in which it had been connected with the Rolly case.

"I'd like to show him!" Chris Stockton said again, after he had gone over all the varied information.

One story had mentioned Rollert's clubs, and by his clubs Chris was always able to size up a man. The banker's taste in clubs was quiet, though inclining to the athletic. The love motif was fading faster and faster from Chris's mind. He remembered Barney's declaration that as far as the police knew, Rollert had never seen a chorus lady except across the footlights.

The tooth that had been found on the sidewalk interested Chris.

"He must have been in pretty good condition to jar loose one of the other fellow's teeth," he decided.

Moodily he slouched along toward the scene of the crime, with his head hanging and his eyes blank. If Rollert had hit one such blow, he had probably hit others. His knuckles had indicated that, too. It seemed likely that he had been attacked by only one man, since two, with surprise in their favor, would have downed him before he could have done much damage. It might have been a plain, ordinary, interrupted holdup.

"The other fellow must have been pretty well marked up before he put over his own haymaker," he reasoned. "What would he do? Run west, away from Broadway, of course, unless he had a car waiting. If he had no car, he couldn't get far, on the West Side, with a face like his must have been, without being stopped by a cop; and he couldn't ring up a doctor after midnight without running some risk of identification. What would he do, then? Probably breeze into a big, busy hospital and tell them that he'd run into a lamp-post, or a taxi had hit him, or something. They'd fix him up and shoot him out again without getting excited over it, wouldn't they? It would take a gunshot wound to get them interested. I wonder if the police have followed up that end!"

Chris braced up and walked with more purpose in his stride. The hospital to which Rollert had first been taken was almost around the corner from the scene of the attack. Chris went there first, but

drew a blank in attempting to trace another battered man. There had been several men fixed up on that night, but none had lost any teeth.

Undiscouraged, he headed westward, toward Tenth Avenue. At the West Side Public Hospital he was lucky enough to find on day duty the interne who had done a night shift at the time when Rollert had been beaten up.

"No, that was a quiet night," said the young doctor thoughtfully. "We didn't do much business—no auto accidents, no stills blown up, no nothing much. Saturday night is when we're busiest. I had only one job—Scrappy Mullen was in to have his face straightened out."

"Who is Scrappy Mullen? A crook?"

"No, he's one of our regular Saturday nighters—a quarrelsome lad when lit and ready to tackle odds."

"Had he lost a tooth, doctor?"

"Three of them—and he had a cut cheek bone and a cauliflower ear coming."

"I'll drop around and see him, if you have his address, doctor," Chris decided.

The interne looked it up for him at once.

"He'll be working on the docks somewhere, if he hasn't got into an argument with his boss," he said. "They'll probably be able to tell you at his house."

VI

SCRAPPY MULLEN's residence was on the third floor of a red brick Tenth Avenue tenement house. Not without qualms Chris Stockton entered the gloom of its narrow hallway and ascended the dark, carpeted stairs. He tapped stealthily upon the translucent glass door and waited.

A footstep as cautious as his own rapping sounded lightly on the floor within. A shadow, vague, formless, darkened the glass. Then the door swung open a crack and a blue eye, with blackened flesh around it, surveyed Chris. Scrappy Mullen had responded to stealth.

"Better let me come in, Scrappy," Chris whispered softly. "I'm not a cop, or I'd have come through that door."

The eye continued to regard him unwaveringly for thirty seconds.

"What you want?" demanded a husky, uncertain voice.

"I want to talk to you about teeth."

The eye blinked; then the door opened wider.

Somewhat gingerly Chris entered and

took up an alert position near the door. He was standing in a kitchen, the floor of which was strewn with newspapers. "Rolly" leaped to his eye from every page. He surveyed his host.

Scrappy Mullen was wiping drops of perspiration from a maculate brow. There was nothing particularly aggressive about him. He seemed to be a chunky, light-haired little man whose backbone had been removed. His battered face was no longer bandaged, but it should have been.

"I'm sort o' glad you run me down, fellow," he said dispiritedly, speaking with a thickness explained by his absent teeth. "You're a reporter, ain't you? He ain't dead, is he?"

Exultation welled up in Chris Stockton. He had won—and won with hardly an effort! Now he could show Hollenbocker!

"No, he isn't dead," he answered. "Yes, I'm a reporter."

Scrappy cast a glance at the newspapers and shuddered.

"A fine party I've had, sittin' in this blasted flat readin' papers about him dyin' and wonderin' whether to beat it or keep on layin' low," said Mullen. "Nobody I ever beat up before got in the papers. Honest, fellow, I didn't know he was hurt much when I left him."

"How did it happen?"

"Like them things do happen," said Scrappy. "I was sort of drunk, maybe, and he come hurrying along in his stiff shirt and shiny mustache. He was lookin' around for a taxi, I guess, and sort of run into me. I called him everything I could think of, and he slammed me on the mouth. He started it, I'm tellin' you!"

Scrappy moved his head up and down with great earnestness.

"He started it," he repeated. "We mixed it, and he got in some good ones, but it was me that slammed him for the count. It didn't take a minute, and when he went down I ran for it before anybody showed. I didn't think nothin' about it, and I went around to the West Side Public to get fixed up, like I always do. How was I to know I'd slammed a big one? He might ha' been a waiter for all I could tell."

Scrappy sniffed and darted a glance of horror at the black headlines of the papers on the floor. The power of the press had overwhelmed and disarmed him.

"They got all kinds of rough stuff on

him now," he muttered. "It's all come out. Honest, fellow, I didn't mean to wreck the guy's life. I just wanted to push his face in for him."

Chris was absorbing all this, and remembering every word of it for his story—the story that was to crush Hollenbocker and his love nests and—though this was merely incidental—give the *Pabulum* a real beat.

Scrappy looked up at his guest morosely.

"What you goin' to do with me?" he demanded. "Is that guy goin' to die on me?"

"He is not," Chris answered. "He's getting better fast, though he must have got a good knock on the head when you knocked him down."

"That's good!" said Mullen, relieved. "I don't hold no grudges. I got no use for the chair."

"Here's what's going to happen, Scrappy," Chris said calmly. "You come with me, and tell your story to the editor of the *Pabulum* first. Then, when you give up to the police—after the other papers have gone to press—the *Pabulum* will see that you don't get a raw deal. Otherwise—well, the police will get you, anyhow."

Scrappy sighed and felt his cheek bone tenderly. Chris's air of decision had quite overcome him.

"I s'pose I got to do it," he mumbled. "There's a banana boat goin' out to-morrow from the foot of the street, and I was goin' to hop it, but—I never been away from this town, and I don't want to go."

"Better come with me, Scrappy," said Chris, with the air of a disinterested counsellor. "When Rollert comes to, he'll be glad enough to have you around to disprove these stories that he was beaten up as the result of some scandalous love affair. He won't be hard on you."

"All right—I'll come," Mullen agreed without enthusiasm.

Chris gave him no time to change his mind. Over to the *Pabulum* office he guided him, keeping up a reassuring patter of words. Past the guard at the door of the editorial offices, who surveyed them belligerently but did not challenge, Chris herded the apprehensive Scrappy. Straight down the corridor into the vast private office of Thomas Jefferson Hollenbocker they went.

The editor was at his desk. He got up, flying frost signals in his eyes when he saw them.

"I've brought in the man who did up Rollert," Chris announced as casually as he could. "Tell your story, Scrappy."

Scrappy told it, though not as effectively as he might have if he had had more teeth in his mouth and less tremolo in his voice.

Mr. Hollenbocker listened to it all with hardly a movement of his depending jowls. If he were experiencing the thrills of an editor to whom has come one of the biggest beats of the year, he concealed the fact admirably. At the end of the narrative he spoke acridly to Chris Stockton.

"Preposterous! Ridiculous! A common street fight! Do you think, Stockton, that I am going to feed our readers any such vulgar twaddle as that?"

"It happens to be the truth," replied Chris dryly.

Again he felt the constriction of the throat and heating of the face that had come to him before in this office.

"Don't talk to me about the truth!" Hollenbocker bawled, getting into the stride of his anger. "I told you what we wanted! What has this low gangster to do with my love nest campaign? A vulgar street brawl! Why, you simpleton, you fool, you—"

He came closer to Chris Stockton, for the purpose of driving home his remarks with a finger on Chris's breastbone. He thumped it once, then shook a pink, rounded fist in the reporter's face and thumped again.

It was too much. Chris's own fist shot out of its own volition, and buried itself in Mr. Hollenbocker's corporeality. Mr. Hollenbocker went down like a punctured balloon. Bellowing lustily, he arose again and charged at Chris, as if he meant to override him. Shortly thereafter he went down again.

His shouts were taken up elsewhere in the editorial offices. Rapid footsteps thudded outside. The giant gatekeeper burst in. He paused, aghast at the sight of his boss wallowing on the floor.

Scrappy Mullen, who had watched all this with rising excitement, turned as the guard entered. His habitual belligerence burst into flame. Poised on his toes, he converted his chunky body into a war club of which his fist was the spike. He sent himself hurtling at the gateman. It was the counterpart of the blow that had felled Rollert.

The doorkeeper joined his chief on the floor.

Chris Stockton had recovered his sanity. He grabbed Scrappy Mullen by the coat collar.

"Come on!" he shouted.

He dragged him from his bewildered foe and surged down the corridor. Nobody showed any disposition to stop him. At the elevators Scrappy began to run of his own accord. Chris plunged for the stairway, ran up one flight with Mullen at his heels, and caught an elevator. The car shot them down to the street.

"We better beat it back to my place," panted Scrappy Mullen. "He don't know my name. Did you kill him?"

The question startled Chris. He did not know precisely what he had done to Mr. Hollenbocker. Silently he followed Mullen's lead.

"We both better hop that banana boat in the mornin'," Scrappy said, out of the corner of his mouth, as they drew near his neighborhood. "These editors got a drag with the cops, ain't they?"

"They have," Chris admitted unhappily. "You don't think I killed him, do you, Scrappy? Fat men die easily."

"I dunno," Scrappy answered; "but I wouldn't stick around to find out, if I was you."

"I won't," said Chris.

At the corner of Mullen's block a newspaper truck shrieked to a stop and deposited a pile of late afternoon papers with a newsdealer. Chris halted to buy one.

The Rollert case had flopped. Rolly had walked out of the private hospital on his own feet. He had paused at the door of his limousine to inform reporters who were there on death wait duty that he had instructed his lawyer to file libel suits for heavy damages against a number of newspapers of wide circulation. Beyond that he had nothing to say.

"If you hadn't mixed in this other thing you'd be out of the woods," Chris said to Scrappy. "As it is, you're probably wanted as much as I am."

"Ain't that hell?" inquired Mullen.

VII

THE banana boat was not to sail until eleven next morning. That night Chris tossed uneasily on a frowzy couch in the flat of Scrappy Mullen, the criminal he

had run down. He dreamed of barren apple trees.

Next morning, dressed in a spare suit of work clothes that Scrappy used on the docks, he waited, trembling, in Scrappy's kitchen for Mrs. Mullen to bring them the morning papers.

When they came, Chris seized the *Pabulum* in shaking hands. There was no black border; but black letters leaped up at him:

EDITOR ASSAULTED!

There was a huge picture of Thomas Jefferson Hollenbocker lying prone, with arms and legs bent grotesquely, even gruesomely, on his own office rug.

"Editor Hollenbocker after the murderous attack made upon him by two desperate profligates infuriated by his determined campaign against love nests," ran the accompanying text. "'Love nests must go!' first words of dauntless editor upon recovering consciousness. Campaign will continue with redoubled force."

Chris read the story, paying avid attention to the description of the assailants of Mr. Hollenbocker. One, it was averred, was a scoundrel of at least six feet six inches in stature, and broad in proportion, with a livid scar across his right cheek. He wore brass knuckles, and brandished a pistol that had missed fire. The other, the wielder of the blackjack, was a dark-complexioned man with black eyes set in a face ravaged by dissipation. Their names were unknown, and they had made good their escape, but the readers of the *Pabulum* were promised even more startling developments in the love nest campaign as a result of the attempted assassination.

Chris Stockton dropped the paper to the floor and unbuttoned the coat of Scrappy Mullen's work clothes.

"It's all right," he said to Scrappy, in the level voice of one who is stunned by relief. "We don't take the banana boat. Hollenbocker's running true to form. He doesn't want to find us worse than we don't want to be found. We'd ruin his love nest campaign!"

"We're safe, huh?" mumbled Scrappy. He pondered. "We might ha' slammed the fat guy harder than that and got away with it. Where you goin'?"

Chris Stockton paused at the door.

"I'm going to get a job as an assistant consultant in public relations," he said, and clattered down the dark stairs.

Two Trails North

IN THIS STORY OF THE SNOWBOUND NORTHLAND TWO MEN
TRAVEL IN THE SAME DIRECTION—ONE FINDS THE
REWARD OF LOVE, THE OTHER DEATH

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

THREE were two trails leading north. They wound through the bush, down the snowy courses of rivers, across great nameless lakes, but always they bore north.

There were other trails of course: the unwavering line of dots in the snow that marked the passing of a fox, the floundering trail of a moose, the pattering, doglike tracks of wolves, the mysterious trail of the caribou, which walk on crust that would break beneath a man.

There were many other trails, great and small, but they crossed and curved in all directions. They had no single objective, like the two trails that led always north.

These were the trails of men: the broad, shallow trail of snowshoes. The webs that made one trail were longer and narrower than those that had made the other trail, and the longer, narrower webs had made their trail a day or so before the second trail was made.

But side by side, companionably, never leaving each other, the two trails wound on and on through the silent, snow-hushed bush; down the broad breasts of rivers that flowed sluggishly under their armor of ice to Hudson Bay; across lakes dotted with black and rocky islands—on and on, silently, doggedly, side by side, toward the north.

And now one must learn the story of Tommy Hardin and Armand Pilon—and another—so that the story of the two trails that led north may be clear.

Armand Pilon was a free trader. His post was not a large one, nor pretentious, but he had located it thoughtfully, and it prospered. He spoke the French of the *voyageurs*, and they liked to trade with this man who was one of them. Armand spoke

Cree, and the Indians found it easier to trade with him than to make some other trader understand their bargaining.

Armand also spoke English, with flashing teeth and a genial smile that brought him the trade of many of the white men. The post of Pilon, the free trader, therefore prospered exceedingly.

Armand was a small, gentle man; courteous, hospitable, always smiling. He had a face like a character sketch in charcoal, with straight, romantic black hair, brushed back from his forehead, very bright and kindly eyes, and a tiny, bristly mustache sketched in with a few, short downward strokes of the charcoal stick. It was a face to be delineated with broad, quick strokes—a likable, but not a striking face.

It would be hard, it would be impossible, however, to sketch Tommy Hardin in broad charcoal strokes. He was not a man to be delineated in such fashion.

At some time in the years before the bush country got him, Tommy had been what men call a gentleman. The fineness that marks the true gentleman still lingered, hesitantly but distinguishably, in his features.

His eyes were fine, aristocratic, thin-lidded; his cheek bones high and sharp and proud. There was something of the thoroughbred in the sensitive, mobile nostrils; more than a hint of good breeding in the repose of his thin red lips and the dominating curve of his jaw.

Tommy Hardin would be a better subject for dry-point than for charcoal. There was something elegantly sharp about him.

And now we come to Renee Pilon. No charcoal stick will do here, nor harsh dry-point graver. Crayon we need; vivid, colorful, lavish of beauty. Oils would give

us the colors, but not the smoothness, the delicate tones, we shall need to delineate the wife of Armand Pilon.

Her face was an oval of creamy tints that blended mysteriously with warm flesh-pinks and shadows that were almost umber. Her eyes were dark and warm and soft—aye, and passionate; and her nose short and vivaciously tilted.

She had a geranium red mouth, with high-lights of scarlet, and dark, inviting little shadows that lurked in the corners. A single graceful sweep of the crayon might do for her chin and neck and soft bosom, and then there would be required the black crayon for her hair.

Yet with a great downward sweep of broad black, and even with the high-lights rubbed in, the sketch has hair not as blue-black nor glossy as were the straight, long locks of Renee Pilon. Even with colorful and eager crayons we have sketched her less charming than she was, for no mere plot of colors upon paper or canvas, no matter how cleverly and artfully applied, could quite reflect all the radiant vivaciousness and joy of living that shone from the eyes, from every feature, of Armand Pilon's wife.

Armand worshiped her with the idolatry that inconspicuous little men often display toward their wives. If he caught her glance, even in the most casual fashion, it sent his heart pounding suddenly against his ribs. Her smile was a benediction; it made him think of soft chimes ringing in the distance.

If she had frowned at him—but she did not. Renee was too busy and too happy to frown, and least of all to frown at Armand. For he was her child and her husband in one; it had been his weakness, his helplessness, his goodness of heart, and his cleanliness of mind that had won Renee.

Her thoughts of him were the thoughts of a mother for an only and lovable child; not the thoughts of a passionate woman for her husband. She loved him as one speaks in his sleep; automatically, meaningless, without feeling.

Armand and Renee had been married only a few months when they first met Tommy Hardin. Tommy paddled in from nowhere in a battered and blistered old canoe. In the bow there were two rather gaunt packs. In the stern was the man. That was all.

Armand and his wife watched.

"He is a stranger, that one," commented Armand, who spoke English most of the time, because Renee wished it. "An odd one for the bush, yes?"

Renee nodded, her eyes on the stranger. He was not tall, but he was lithe, and there was something in his carriage that was youthful and military and not of the bush country. He swung up the trail whistling an old *chanson* that Renee's fathers had sung on many a lonesome trail when the country was young and men braved death rather than turn a deaf ear to the call of high adventure, the most fickle and the most exacting of mistresses.

The words of the old song leaped into Renee's mind. They were words of love; the love of strong men and young who had but little time for love, and needs must waste neither time nor opportunity.

Renee flushed and turned away from the window. Her woman's instinct warned her that this man was one of those who were like the *voyageurs* in the *chanson*. He had the flashing eyes, the well-formed hands, the thin red lips of the men who had passed, singing, down trails and waterways that had known before only the voices of nature and her children; the men who made love well and quickly and passed on.

How she knew these things, Renee did not understand, and in some subtle way the knowledge shamed and angered her.

Yet when the stranger entered the trading room, and Armand greeted him, Renee looked up and studied the two men from her point of vantage in a shadowy corner. And her eyes were fixed, not on Armand's smiling and hospitable features, but on the gravely mocking face of the stranger.

II

"RENEE," Tommy remarked casually, "your lips were made for kisses. Come here and let me have them!"

Renee looked up quickly, but there was nothing startled in her glance. She had been expecting something like this for two days; ever since Tommy had first looked into her eyes and smiled that slow, inscrutable smile.

They were alone in the big, dusky trading room of the post. It was a low-ceilinged, comfortable place, redolent of kerosene and woolen goods, of soap and molasses, of bacon and onions, of tobacco and cheap candy.

In the background were huge, binlike

shelves loaded down with plain necessities and gaudy luxuries, thrown together in a colorful hodgepodge. In front of the shelves was the counter; a huge, thick, clumsy affair, the top scarred and scratched and carved with initials, dates, and crude drawings.

A pot-bellied stove squatted in a shallow box of sand in the middle of the room, the long chimney angling off close to the heavy beams, supported precariously by infrequent loops of twisted snare-wire.

There were two windows; one on either side of the door. They were small, square windows, high up, and they admitted just enough light to make the trading room a place of soft shadows that seemed to mingle with the blended odors of the place, to form a subtle atmosphere of mystery—or of romance.

Renee met Tommy's glance fairly, as a man would have met it. But she smiled as a man would never have smiled.

"My lips are my husband's, *m'sieu'*," she reminded him tartly, but not acidly. "And even my husband, when he wishes a kiss, does not say to me 'Come here!' He himself comes to me."

"Meaning," Tommy asked with a lazy, disinterested smile, "that if I wish to kiss you I must go to you for the caress? Is that the understanding?"

Renee flushed suddenly. It was not with shame, she realized, but with anger. The man was insolent; she hated him!

"No!" she said fiercely. "I mean that what you say is a double insult. I mean—"

She hesitated an instant, and Tommy interrupted.

"You mean," he said mockingly, "that you have not yet made up your mind to make love to me. Well, you will before long, Renee, only—I warn you—don't wait too long to come to a decision. I shall not be here long; three or four days more, at most."

Still smiling, he turned and looked out through the window, his sharp, clean-cut features showing up cameo-like against the shadows; the light that poured through the window making of his profile an intense and vital study in lights and shadows.

"*Sacré bleu!*" Renee stormed. "You dare to talk to me like that? You, who have accepted the hospitality of my husband, you speak to me so? *Mon Dieu!* He would kill you, did he hear of this!"

The last words did not ring true. Re-

nee knew they did not; there was no conviction in her voice, only bravado.

Tommy chuckled. It was not a good-natured sound. It was a mean, hateful sound; a sneer that had become audible.

"He would!" Renee repeated angrily. "He would kill you!"

Tommy did not even glance in her direction. He continued to look out through the window.

"Armand?" he asked.

His smile was gently derisive. The subtle intonations of his voice made the single word, as he spoke it, a damning and unanswerable reflection upon the manhood of Armand Pilon. It was as if Hardin had said:

"What? That meek little man, who eats from your hand—you say he would kill me? He is a manikin, not a man! Why, you yourself treat him as a child, and not as a husband. Ha! You amuse me, Renee!" Only Tommy had been more effective with his one word; he had said more, implied more, hurt more.

Renee stamped sharply with her foot, and tears of rage sprang to her eyes.

"You think not, *m'sieu'*?" she raged. "I shall tell him, and then we shall see. You, who make love so easily—"

"Right-o, Renee," Tommy nodded casually. "Here comes Armand now. Tell him all about it."

The young wife felt a sinking sense of defeat. She had an almost irresistible desire to scream; to tear her hair, to scratch somebody. Horrifying phrases, that she had heard men use in moments of anger, rushed up in her throat. Her long, slim fingers balled up in little knobs; there was a look of baffled anger in her eyes.

"Mother of God, but I hate you!" she whispered.

"They all do—at first," Tommy remarked. He pulled out his cigarette case, lit one, and flipped the match in Renee's direction, something contemptuous in the act.

Before she could find words that would carry her molten thoughts, the door swung open and Armand breezed into the room.

Renee hesitated, and in that moment her determination left her. She felt, rather than saw, Tommy's mocking glance. Through her mind ran the words he had uttered only a minute before. Flushing, she turned to the counter and started tracing meaningless patterns on its surface.

A wiser, a more sophisticated man, possessed of less childlike trust, would have suspected something. But Armand did not.

Was Renee not his wife? And was not this Tommy Hardin a guest who had partaken of his salt, been sheltered beneath his roof? Armand had the almost pitiful faith of simple men who live much alone; who do not meet enough of their fellow men to learn the bitter lesson of distrust.

"Who knows not the carcajou, does not hate him," the Indians say. It is a good saying. Armand did not know his fellow man well enough yet to learn.

"To-morrow, perhaps to-night yet, we have snow," Armand announced as he closed the door. "I smell it in the wind. Soon it will be winter. I like that!"

Pilon rubbed his palms together cheerily. Hardin glanced out the window and up at the sky.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you're right, Armand," he nodded. "And that means I'd better be moving on if I'm to do any trapping this winter. I'm a month or two late now. I always was a lazy dog. Any good territory around here?"

III

RENEE felt an odd coldness around her heart. Something very like a feeling of terror swept over her. Tommy was going on—at once! He had said it would be several days.

She got a grip on herself; a fierce, painful hold that hurt her heart. She hated this man; she was glad he was going—the sooner the better. But she hung on Armand's words as if life itself depended upon them.

"I have been wondering," Armand said hesitantly, "how *m'sieu'* would like the job of helping here? Right now there is not so much to do, for the trappers have all gone into the bush. But soon there will be business, when the freeze-up comes, around Christmas, and in the spring also. Last year I worked very hard, and handled it myself; this year—"

He smiled fondly at Renee. "I am married. I would have more time to spend with my wife. And I would not like to leave her alone while bringing in supplies from outside.

"I could not pay so much," he added with a deprecating shrug, "but the work would not be hard. It is late now to build

camps, and there is no good territory open near. What does *m'sieu'* think?"

Tommy glanced at Renee, his eyes inscrutable. He hesitated a moment, as if considering. Renee drew in a deep breath and held it. Would the man never speak?

"Thanks, Armand," Tommy said at last. "The offer appeals to me. I told you I was a lazy dog, and I generally pass as a black sheep. I'm your man!"

Armand laughed, rather uncertainly, for he had not quite understood Tommy's allusion, and held out his hand.

"Good, *m'sieu'*!" he said, his very white teeth flashing beneath his crisp mustache.

"It is settled, *hein?*"

Tommy cast a fleeting glance at Renee, and the two men shook on their understanding.

"It is settled," he nodded.

The coldness around Renee's heart was swept away by a sudden rush of warmth. She was oddly happy; she knew there was high color in her cheeks; that her eyes were bright and shining. And she hated herself, she hated Armand, she hated Tommy most of all, in the realization that these things were so.

Armand looked around, smiling happily. Last of all, and longest, his eyes rested affectionately on his wife.

"We shall have good times this winter, we three, eh?" he chuckled. "We shall be happy to have you with us, *m'sieu'*; is it not so, my little one?"

Renee felt Tommy's eyes on her. She hated him for that. He was making her a party to his designs. She nodded briefly, trying determinedly to halt the rush of color that swept to her face.

"Yes, Armand," she answered tonelessly.

"And now I must feed the dogs," Armand said, bustling through the room to the rear of the building where the stores were kept. "They are very necessary in the snow; we must take good care of them, *hein?*" He went out, leaving Renee and Tommy alone.

"The fool!" was the angry thought that flashed through the woman's mind. She hated her husband for trusting her. Why did he leave her alone with this man? Why did he not surround her with a high palisade of jealousy, manlike?

A woman's husband should protect her. She should not be left to be the prey of other men. That was why the good God

made fighters of men; that they might protect their women and their homes.

The answer came to her, but it did not satisfy, it did not comfort her. Armand trusted her! She did not want to be trusted; she wanted to be protected against this man who was like the *coureurs de bois* in the old *chanson* he had whistled; this man who made love so easily, so carelessly, with sardonic, mocking lights in his eyes.

She heard the rear door thud shut; a moment later the eager barking of the dogs. The long rays from the setting sun cut through the gloom of the room, the mellow shafts accenting the shadows in the corners.

Renee knew that Tommy was waiting for her to speak first. He was standing silent and motionless by the window, his sharp-cut features touched by the yellow light of the sun until his face was bronze to the woman's eyes.

The silence lengthened; it began to pulse and throb in little waves of stillness. Renee clenched her teeth. She would not speak first—but she did.

"Well?" she said sharply, her voice seeming loud and harsh in the waiting silence.

"Well?" Tommy repeated, mocking her.

"I suppose you're happy now," she said with bitter emphasis.

"I shall not be quite happy until you kiss me," he replied.

The words made her heart leap like that of a wild animal which feels for the first time the touch of the human hand. Renee knew Tommy did not mean what he said; knew it by the mildly jeering tone of his voice and the dancing lights in his eyes.

She made no reply. The silence started throbbing again.

"Are you going to come here and kiss me?" the cool, almost impersonal voice demanded.

"No! I hate you!" Renee said, and the words were almost a sob.

"Then, as of old, Mahomet will have to go to the mountain," Tommy remarked.

Renee turned away. She did not dare to watch him. She wanted to run away, but her muscles were limp. Her knees trembled; a cold sweat was on her forehead.

She heard his calm, un hurried steps across the floor, and sensed his nearness. The quiet going and coming of his breath was in her ears.

A hand, gentle and soft as a woman's,

touched her shoulder, passed down her arm, thrillingly.

"Look up at me, Renee," he challenged softly.

Slowly, mechanically, as a subject obeys the orders of a hypnotist, Renee turned her head. She looked up into Tommy's calm gaze, her own eyes wild.

Oh, if only Armand would come back! But he would not—not in time. She could hear him shouting jovially to the dogs. He was so far away, and this man was so near, this masterful one with eyes that understood everything.

"Kiss me, Renee," he said.

There was nothing of passion in his voice, but the woman sensed the fires that burned behind this man's icy reserve.

Slowly she lifted her face to his, her lips parted, her breath fluttering their softness as leaves flutter in the wind.

Tommy's face came closer. It was a beautiful, masterful man face in the gloom of the room.

She felt the cool, firm pressure of his lips on her own. Then, just as her lids fluttered down over her burning eyes, she met his glance for a fleeting instant.

The knowledge of victory swept through her in a flood. In that instant when his lips touched her a burst of flame had shaken him.

It was a woman's victory, that glance—but it was not a good thing for a wife to see in the eyes of a man who was not her husband.

Outside the snow began to fall. Big, clinging flakes, they were, that fell like cold, moist kisses upon the brown bosom of the earth.

IV

THAT first snow had long since disappeared. For days afterward the bush had been green and brown again; the noon sun warm and genial.

But there had been other snows. The sun's arc was shrinking daily. The sky was never blue and bright now; even when there were no clouds, the heavens were moody and gray and bleak. The lake had frozen up and opened again, scattering the blocks of ice over the surface like the bits of cloth in a crazy quilt.

But now the lake was frozen a foot thick, and laced with long, wind-carved drifts of snow, like careless windrows in a field. The bush was hushed and silent with snow, the

boughs of the evergreens drooping with their white and powdery burdens.

At the post of Armand Pilon, the free trader, everything was snug and warm. Deep, white-walled paths had been shoveled through the snow between the house and the store and down to the lake. Cheery spirals of smoke whirled from the perky tin chimneys of both buildings, and the wood boxes were full to overflowing with dry, pitchy wood that crackled like burning tar in the big stoves.

"*C'est tres jolie, Renee,*" Armand remarked, nodding toward the rigid, gleaming lake and the stiff and soldierlike ranks of evergreens that marched down to the distant shore. "*Le vent a tourne, et—*"

"Oh, speak in English, Armand!" Renee interrupted crossly.

They were standing close together by the window, looking out through a clear spot in the frost-blazoned panes. Armand's arm was around her shoulders; his whole attitude one of contented possessiveness.

Renee felt very uncomfortable. For a moment, there in Armand's husbandly embrace, she was tempted to tell him everything, but the thought died before it was fully formed.

She hated herself for doing what she had done, and she vented her feeling on the unoffending Armand.

"I forget, dear!" he chuckled apologetically. "We are French; it is the mother tongue."

"We are in an English country," Renee said sharply. "I like to hear men speak English!"

Armand winced. It was rather a tender spot she had touched. He was proud of his French blood; the blood of the men who had been the first whites to tread the trails of his beloved bush.

"It is my mother tongue—and yours," he repeated softly. "It is a pretty speech. But, as you say, so it shall be. I say that the wind has changed, and I think we shall have a bad snow, very deep, and soon. And then the bush, the lake, will be even more beautiful—like my little wife, who grows lovelier every day!"

He kissed her, his lips warm and soft on her own. His mustache tickled, and she had a hysterical desire to laugh.

For a moment she was passive under the touch of her husband's lips, and then, suddenly, she threw herself into his arms and clung to him, kissing him fiercely, passion-

ately, as if she found in the contact the strength, the feeling of security, the safety she hungered after.

"We are very happy, we two, are we not?" Armand whispered, stroking the black and glossy hair, sleek as a raven's wing. "Little Renee and—"

There was the sound of the door opening; a sharp blast of icy air came in. Renee struggled furiously from Armand's embrace. He chuckled, his little brushlike mustache twitching.

"*Nom du nom!*" he sputtered, still chuckling. "Look you, *m'sieu'*, this one is still a bride, that she fears to be seen in her husband's arms!"

Renee backed away, her face flaming, her hair disheveled. She did not look in Tommy's direction, but she knew he was watching her with his gently mocking eyes.

"Women like their love-making best when it's made in secret, Armand," Tommy said. "Secrecy adds savor, romance, sweetness—whatever you want to call it."

He added, in a very businesslike voice: "I've got the snow shoveled out down to the lake, and away from the windows, Armand. Anything else right now?"

It pleased the man, Renee knew, to adopt the attitude of a humble servant toward Armand in her presence. It made Armand seem so incompetent and helpless, and Tommy so masterful and capable.

"Why, no, *m'sieu'*," Armand hesitated. "I can think of nothing else. There is not much to be done at this time of the year, hein?"

The two men seated themselves close to the heat-swollen stove, while Renee moved around the room restlessly, looking out the windows, aimlessly rearranging stock—anything to keep herself busy.

Endlessly the conversation of the two men dribbled through her brain; Armand's voice sharp, staccato, and Tommy's responses calm and deep. They were discussing the weather; the likelihood of a storm.

She studied them covertly, hating them both. They were so comfortable, stretched out in front of the stove. She reflected bitterly that men have an animal-like capacity for taking comfort. Women never take comfort in anything. A man lights his pipe, stretches out his legs to a fire, opens a conversation or a book—

Renee hated Armand for not being jealous, for not protecting her against Tommy.

She hated fools, and her husband's weakness was a sensitive spot.

She hated Tommy for making her miserable. She hated him because he had asked her to kiss him—and she hated him because he had not asked more than a kiss—careless, hasty caresses, snatched now and again when opportunity presented itself.

And Tommy had never gone out of his way to make opportunities. Renee hated him for that. Only a high pride she could not humble had prevented her from forcing the issue—and she knew Tommy had read that fact in her eyes too. Mother of God, how she hated him for that!

Choking, she hurried to the door. The two men looked up; Armand solicitous; Tommy curiously.

"What's the matter, dear?" Armand asked quickly, getting to his feet.

Renee knew the expression of her face, even in the semidarkness of the room, had betrayed her.

"Nothing!" she said sharply. "Sit down! Can't I move without explaining to you?"

As she closed the door behind her with a vicious little thud, she was acutely aware of two things; the hurt look in her husband's gentle, doglike gaze, and the understanding, mocking light in the eyes of Tommy Hardin.

V

ARMAND stuck his head through the kitchen door, beaming at Renee.

"Going over to the store, dear," he called out. "Be back by the time breakfast is ready!" and he disappeared like a jumping jack.

This was several days after Renee had flounced out of the big trading room and hurried over to the smaller, two-roomed cabin where she and Armand ate and slept.

Tommy kept bachelor's hall in a log hut some little distance away, but he ate his meals with Armand and Renee. Generally he was late to breakfast, but this morning his gentle rap sounded on the door just a moment after Armand left.

Renee's heart started thumping against her ribs.

"Come in," she said, trying to keep her voice casual.

Tommy entered and glanced around the room.

"Armand?" he said questioningly.

"He's gone to fire up at the store. You're an early bird this morning, aren't you?"

"There's a reason."

He studied her thoughtfully for an instant, his eyes narrowed slightly; a look in their shaded depths she had never seen there before.

"Renee," he said, and his voice had lost something of its usual casual grace, "we are going away, you and I—very far away—and very soon."

"No!" she said hastily. She took an uncertain step backward. "No! Armand—"

"If Armand isn't man enough to hold you, he deserves to lose you."

Renee had the feeling that Tommy meant those words to ring true, but knew himself that they did not. It was a most uncomfortable sensation, like having supposedly firm ground begin to crumble away underfoot.

"Armand needs me," Renee whispered.

Her face felt pale and set, as if warm blood would never flow there again. Sections of her brain seemed to be turning over and over, monotonously, like leaves of a book, heavy, leaden, blank leaves.

Tommy took a quick step forward. Something was stirring in him; it showed in his eyes, not cold and mocking now, but warm and gentle. It showed in his white face, and in his fine trembling hands held out in almost a gesture of appeal.

"And I—want you," he said in a husky whisper that was not in the least like the voice of Tommy Hardin.

He came closer, while Renee stared at him, half terrified, half fascinated.

"Tommy! Don't—"

He crushed out the rest of her words in his arms. Renee's world rocked.

She forgot the passing of time, forgot where she was, who she was, what she was. She forgot the past, and her hopes of the future, and remembered only the glowing present.

And then a deathly, icy chill settled over her, like a breath of sea fog. Without turning, she knew, while her heart stopped beating, that her husband stood looking at her.

Armand did not speak. He stood in the doorway, watching them; his face suddenly pale, his eyes and his mustache startlingly black.

Renee tried to say something, but the words flattened out in her throat.

Tommy started to say something, but what, nobody ever knew.

Armand suddenly leaped, as a wolf leaps at the throat of its prey. His lips were drawn back in a snarl that was not human, his teeth glistening like fangs.

As he leaped he made a deep sound in his throat like the grunt of a charging bull moose, a terrifying male sound that was not human.

The bodies of the two men crashed to the floor. Renee felt that she had been flung off from the center of conflict as if from a rapidly spinning wheel. Panting, her eyes wide with terror, her fingers waxy talons clutching at her breast, she stood and watched.

They fought silently, save for their harsh breathing and their grunts of pain or satisfaction as they received a blow or drove one home. They had struggled to their feet, and the fight raged up and down the kitchen, feet scuffling, pans and dishes clattering to the floor, frenzied, unnatural hate flaming in their eyes.

Tommy had the advantage in size, and he pressed in mercilessly. He struck Armand a short, savage blow to the kidneys, and Armand grunted. Tommy followed with a crashing smash full on the mouth. Armand's head snapped back and he spat blood.

A great sob shook Renee. It must stop; she must stop it, she must! She tried to cry out to Tommy; to shriek to him that he must not hurt Armand, but no sound escaped her constricted throat.

Suddenly something dynamic seemed loosed in Armand Pilon. He retreated no longer; instead, he lunged forward and by sheer savage energy forced Tommy Hardin back. Armand's eyes blazed with the green light of blood-lust.

Armand fought like a trapped carajou. His bleeding knuckles crashed into Tommy's puffed face time and time again; they thumped racking body blows to the body. Tommy's vicious returns jarred Armand, stopped him for an instant now and then, but he kept on his machinelike flailing.

A strange exultation welled up in Renee. She shook with nervous excitement. No longer did she feel like protecting Armand; she felt now that she would like to stand behind him, not before him.

Her man, Armand, the gentle and kindly man at whom Tommy had sneered, her Ar-

mand was fighting for her—and he was winning his fight!

Tommy, contesting fiercely every inch of the way, fell back slowly, until at last he touched the wall. Realizing the danger of that position, he leaped quickly to one side.

As he did so, Armand struck out terrifically. His right fist landed on the point of Tommy's chin; his left thudded just under the right ear.

Tommy crashed backward, and his head struck the edge of the thick plank table.

Renee screamed with horror as she started toward the unconscious man, but Armand caught her by one shoulder and threw her, reeling, against the wall with a strength and brutality of which she had not believed him capable.

"Stay there!" he growled in French.

It was not Armand's voice that was speaking, although the words issued from between Armand's puffed and bleeding lips.

"He's dead—or I hope he is," he gritted. "It makes but little difference. After I am gone, you can see. I leave you now, *madame*—with your lover."

"Oh, Armand—not my lover! You must listen; you must!"

"I do not need to listen. I saw. You may tell the police, when they come, whatever you please. But you need tell me nothing, *madame*."

He did not even give her a parting glance. He did not hesitate an instant. He slammed the door behind him.

A great silence closed around Renee's head. With a little sob she toppled to the floor as if Armand had dealt her a physical blow.

VI

RENEE PILON opened her eyes, and the light gradually came back to her whirling brain. She pulled herself to her feet and stood swaying, looking down at the body of Tommy Hardin.

He was dead—and Armand had killed him. Armand had gone; like a wounded wild animal he would seek solitude. And he took with him all her hope of happiness.

Something moved at her feet. It was Tommy, tossing his head restlessly from side to side.

"Tommy!" Renee cried. "Speak—"

He opened his eyes, stared up at her weakly. The old mocking light was in them, but very faint.

"It was beastly—"

He would have said more, but his eyes dimmed and he grew limp again.

It was early the next morning before he spoke again. He lay stretched out on the bed in the larger room of the house.

Seated beside him, weary and torn with the desire to sleep, her face haggard and years older, was Renee.

"My fault," Tommy said. "A little—water—if you'll be—so good."

She brought him instead a cup of black, hot coffee, in which was a liberal dash of brandy. He gulped it down, and his eyes grew brighter.

"Fine," he said. "I'll be all right now."

He looked around curiously.

"Where's Armand?" he asked.

Renee noted that he did not hesitate over the name. He was as casual as if he but asked the time of day.

"Gone," she replied tonelessly. "He thought you were dead. He wouldn't listen to me. He's gone—God knows where!"

Tommy looked up at her. The old sardonic light was in his eyes, the ghost of the understanding smile on his puffed, bruised lips.

"You did love him, after all," he said, only half aloud. "I—I wondered about that."

He closed his eyes and apparently he dropped off to sleep.

"You—what?" she asked dully.

Tommy did not answer, and Renee's brain was too weary to play with the puzzle. A numbness crept over her, and she settled down in her chair. The gray dawn came into the room and dimmed the yellow flame of the lamp, but not until it was broad day did Renee awaken.

She started from her chair, glancing guiltily at the bed. She had neglected her patient. A little cry of amazement escaped her as she saw the bed was empty.

"Tommy!" she called sharply. "Tommy! Where—"

There was a sudden draft of cold air, the sound of a door closing.

"Present!"

Tommy stepped into the room, dressed in his warmest clothes. There was a heavy pack on his back; he was ready for the trail.

"He's gone," Tommy said quietly. "Packed up some things at the store and struck out straight through the bush. Didn't take the dogs. Make better time

without them, I suppose, everything considered. They eat more than they can haul, on a long trip. I'm going after him."

"No use," Renee choked. "He'll go on and on until the fire in him burns out, and then he'll drop in the snow. You couldn't bring him back."

"I can," Tommy declared, and there was a touch of grimness in his voice. "A man will believe what he wants to believe. I shall tell him what he wants to believe. That you always hated me—that I stole up on you—held you against your will. He'll believe me—gladly!"

"But—" Renee whispered.

She hesitated, her face flaming. Then she went on bravely:

"That—that wouldn't be true. It was my fault—as much as yours."

"I could explain it to you, I think," Tommy said slowly. "But I won't. It doesn't really matter. But I'll get Armand to come back. That'll make everything right again."

A sudden vision swept before Renee's eyes: Armand as he had looked when he fought. There had been a demon in him then and she knew that demon was not dead.

"He—he'll kill you, Tommy, if you tell him you held me by force."

"I don't think so; he'll be too glad to hear my message. I'll just go on, to some other post. But if he did kill me—would it matter?"

He tried to keep his voice casual; but Renee knew that her fate, Tommy's fate, Armand's fate, hung upon her reply. But her voice was strangled in her dry throat and she was helpless.

Tommy laughed. It was a short, bitter sound like a bark.

"The biggest fool in the world, Renee," he said, "is the man who gets caught in his own trap."

With the words he nodded and disappeared through the doorway.

Renee stood motionless, staring at the spot where Tommy had stood. Slowly the full meaning of his words came to her.

"Tommy!" she sobbed. "Armand will kill you!"

But she did not call out to him; she did not call him back.

There were two trails leading north.

One of them, the trail left by long, narrow webs, was the trail of Armand Pilon,

the free trader. The other was the trail of Tommy Hardin—who had once been a gentleman.

There were other trails, of course, the tracks of fox and moose and wolves and caribou. But only the trails of the two men led unchangingly north.

Their trails wound through the bush,

down the snowy courses of rivers, across great nameless lakes; side by side, leading north.

Days later there was another trail—just one. It led south.

It was made by very long, narrow webs—the trail of Armand Pilon.

The other trail did not return.

The Spirit of Europa

THE GREAT PAGEANT OF THE LADIES' ETHICAL CULTURE SOCIETY, AND HOW IT PROVED A TURNING POINT IN THE LIVES OF SOME OF ITS PERFORMERS

By Ellen Hogue and Jack Bechdolt

ETHELINA PERRY sat far forward on the edge of her chair, her thin hands tightly clasped, her gray eyes bright, on her earnest face the rapt look of a saint viewing the pearly gates and finding them all that the prospectus claimed, and more.

This was the happiest day of Ethelina's life, the day that saw her dreams come true. Civic pride welled in her bosom, and an author's delight in the success of a brain child made her heart beat hard. The Europa Ladies' Ethical Culture Society had consented to produce her pageant, "The Spirit of Europa," to raise the mortgage on the clubhouse, and Robert Jefferson Jeffers, a pageantry director, had been imported from New York to do the thing in a big way.

Mr. Jeffers was sitting on the platform beside Mrs. Euphemia Martin, the club's large, blond president, and his eyes were roving over the assembled clubwomen in search of likely material for his cast. He was a slender young man, and he looked especially slender beside Mrs. Martin. His large, dark eyes were restless; his dark brows and small, dark mustache were startlingly romantic to Ethelina, seen against the pallor of his face. A gentle face, an idealistic person, who would understand that Miss Perry had put into the writing of her pageant all her whole-souled loyalty

and love for the town in which she was born. It was too wonderful!

Mrs. Martin cleared her throat importantly and swept to the front of the platform with the grace and dignity that had won her the presidency of the E. L. E. C. S.

"Mr. Jeffers will choose his own cast," she said. "He will be aided by the pageantry committee, and I'm sure that any of our members will be glad to assist him in any way. I'm sure all of us will consider it a rare privilege to have a part, however humble, in this pageant portraying the history and the spirit of our loved city."

All the ladies bridled and sat a little forward in their chairs. The young girls, daughters of club members who had accompanied their mothers in the hope of being chosen for parts, ceased whispering in the back of the assembly room and came to attention. Ethelina noticed that several of the ladies glanced her way, and a thrill of pride shot through her. They realized at last that Ethelina Perry had done something important in club and civic life.

"But, ladies, there has been a—a slight change in our program." Mrs. Martin hesitated, glancing down into Ethelina's eager gray eyes. "The—the pageantry committee, in session with Mr. Jeffers has decided to accept a proposition he made to

them. Mr. Jeffers has a pageant of his own with him."

Now Mrs. Martin carefully avoided glancing at Ethelina.

"Mr. Jeffers has produced this pageant several times in different cities. He has cleverly written it so that it will fit the history of any town by changing the names only. He feels that it will make for efficiency and—and artistry if we use his pageant. I'm sure that our dear pageantry poet, Miss Perry, will understand, and will realize that it is only because of lack of time that we must give up our heart's hope, the use of her pageant. It's a little long, and it would be more expensive to produce—in fact, it's a little above our simple needs, as Mr. Jeffers has put it."

For a moment all went black before Ethelina's eyes. The room swayed dizzily about her, and the icy hand of disappointment clutched her heart. Mrs. Martin's voice went droning on:

"I'm sure she will accept our thanks for her efforts, and will understand that we are acting solely for the greater good of the E. L. E. C. S. I am going to appoint her technical director, and I beg that she will take this post of responsibility, which no one can fill so well."

Those words rang in Ethelina's ears—"for the greater good of the E. L. E. C. S." What mattered personal disappointment? She rose, trembling, to her feet.

"Madam president," she quavered, "I want to say that—that I am only too glad that—that the committee has seen fit to act for—for the best good of the pageant, and—and I shall be only too glad to serve in—in any capacity, however humble."

She sat down to a subdued clapping of hands, and wiped her lips with her handkerchief—lips that would tremble. Then the important business of the day was on. Robert Jefferson Jeffers strode to the front of the platform, lifted his hawklike eyes, and announced his plans.

It was a poignant moment.

Mrs. Hiram Hepburn Winburn, a portly lady sitting directly behind Ethelina, leaned forward and tapped the disappointed spinster on the shoulder.

"I'm sure, dear, that Mr. Jeffers will choose my Barbara for the *Spirit of Europa*," she whispered; "but I thought maybe you *knew*, and—"

Ethelina glanced uneasily to her left. There, along the line, sat Mrs. Clara Steele

Perkins, whose husband owned the vacant lot on which the ladies of the E. L. E. C. S. planned to hold the pageant. Mrs. Perkins had a daughter, Polly; and Ethelina knew that the ladies of the pageantry committee had discussed both Barbara Winburn, who had decided dramatic talent, and Polly, whose parents must not be offended, for the leadership of the pageant. Either Polly Perkins or Barbara Winburn, clad in white, and sitting on a great white horse, would be the *Spirit of Europa*; and Ethelina had a moment of thankfulness that she had, after all, only a minor part in the production. Both Mrs. Winburn and Mrs. Perkins were very decided ladies, who knew exactly how to stand up for their rights.

Mr. Jeffers was speaking.

"It is a *type* I want," he intoned. "A type to portray the real spirit of a town which has struggled and succeeded as this one has, dear ladies. Will the young ladies in the back of the hall please come forward and sit down here at the foot of the platform? The other characters will be announced through the aid of the pageantry committee, but I must choose this one character, so important to our undertaking."

The young ladies were coming forward. They were led, as most of the town's younger activities were led, by Miss Perkins and Miss Winburn, who had undoubtedly inherited from their mothers the qualities that had made the two ladies powerful in the *Europa Ladies' Ethical Culture Society*. They were charming girls, both of them. Polly Perkins was blond and slender, and her dashing brilliance of color was enhanced by just enough lip rouge to justify the statement that gentlemen prefer blondes—that is, until the eye fell upon Barbara.

Barbara, a tall girl, equally slender and equally dashing. She had black, straight hair brushed back boyishly, and she wore her *Europa* clothes in a manner which suggested Paris. There was no doubt about it, they both were the *Spirit of Europa*.

Robert Jefferson Jeffers's face lighted as he saw them, and involuntarily he straightened his faultless cravat. He leaned to whisper a query to Mrs. Martin. With a slightly troubled countenance, that lady quite evidently explained to him who they were, and who their mothers were.

Ethelina, watching anxiously, clasped her hands again. It was going to be hard to choose. The ladies of the dear E. L. E. C. S., especially Mrs. Winburn and Mrs. Perkins, were so apt to get excited if they felt that they had been slighted!

Even as Ethelina clasped her hands, Mrs. Perkins rose to her feet.

"Before we go any further, I'd like to make an announcement, ladies," she remarked, eying Mrs. Winburn as she spoke. "The vacant lot belonging to Mr. Perkins may be counted on without any further anxiety. It is the only place where a pageant could be given; and as Mr. Perkins's own daughter will undoubtedly take—hem!—a more or less prominent part in the pageant, I am sure he will see that it is cleared and put in order."

Ethelina construed this as a threat, and she construed correctly. Mrs. Perkins meant that if her daughter did *not* have a prominent part in the pageant, the vacant lot would not be cleared and might not be available. This, thought Ethelina, practically presented the rôle of *Spirit of Europa* to Polly.

But Mrs. Hiram Hepburn Winburn was rising heavily to her feet. Her voice was sonorous, heavy, powerful. She was the richest woman in Europa.

"I, too, wish to make an announcement," she remarked to the chair, but with her eye roving to Mrs. Perkins, who sat back triumphantly, waiting developments.

"Mr. Winburn is deeply interested in the pageant. His interest is, of course, due to the fact that his daughter Barbara will be able to give of her dramatic talent to its success. He also has always had the good of our dear society at heart. Therefore he has authorized me to say that, *on account of his personal interest in the production*"—here Mrs. Winburn paused to glare threateningly about her—"he promises that at the end of the pageant, if the ladies have raised as much as three thousand dollars, he will assume the balance of the eight-thousand-dollar mortgage now on the clubhouse. And that means, dear ladies, that our dear E. L. E. C. S. will be clear of debt!"

There was a storm of applause. Money talks; but even as the ladies gently spat their hands, they glanced nervously in the direction of Mrs. Perkins, whose face was darkly flushed.

"No Polly, no vacant lot, no pageant!" she seemed to say.

And Mrs. Winburn's equally determined countenance told the world:

"No Barbara, no five thousand dollars! That's that!"

"If we *could* go on choosing the cast—" remarked Mr. Jeffers wearily. His tired, dark eyes rested hopefully on the lovely young girls below him; he wished with all his heart that the entire pageant could be given by them. And now some silly local politics—even Mr. Jeffers sensed the coming storm—was about to upset all the women with whom he would have to work for the next four weeks. It was ever thus. Pageant directing was a hard, hard life; Mr. Jeffers felt that it was aging him prematurely.

Mrs. Martin, her countenance anxious and troubled, rose to smooth the storm which she knew was brewing. She was the skipper, and her good ship was threatening to founder; but Ethelina also rose swiftly, her thin face flushed. She was in the grip of a big idea.

"Ladies and Mrs. Martin, and Mr. Jeffers," she said breathlessly, "in view of the wonderful offers that Mrs. Perkins and Mrs. Winburn have just made, and also in view of the fact that their daughters are two of the most talented and beautiful young girls in our fair city, I move that Mr. Jeffers consider them *both* for the *Spirit of Europa*, and that at the end of rehearsals they draw lots, or are voted on, or something—and that the one who doesn't get the part shall carry a banner in the pageant, bearing our dear club's initials. I'm sure that this will give them both a fair chance, and—"

Mrs. Perkins and Mrs. Winburn both were on their feet, but Mrs. Euphemia Martin knew when to exercise her authority. Her small, ornamental gavel descended with a bang on her desk.

"Second the motion?" she said imperatively, with a commanding eye fixed on the chairman of the pageantry committee, who obeyed instantly. The ladies of the E. L. E. C. S., relieved, voted "Aye!" vociferously.

Mr. Jeffers looked happier. The two bones of contention, Polly Perkins and Barbara Winburn, giggled contentedly. Mrs. Winburn and Mrs. Perkins were slightly breathless. Ethelina Perry, tremulous, cast down her eyes.

Thirty-eight years old, a confirmed spinster who had never been out of Europia, Ethelina was nevertheless of the stuff of which diplomats are made.

II

In her capacity of technical director of the pageant, Ethelina was busy—busier and happier than she ever remembered being.

She had been vague about her duties at the outset, and apologetic to Mr. Jeffers for her vagueness; but Mr. Jeffers undertook to enlighten her in the kindest way in the world. Some of the duties of a technical director, as he explained them in odd moments, consisted of spending hours in the Europia Public Library, digging noteworthy items out of files of old newspapers; borrowing heirlooms and prized bits of old wardrobe from everybody who had such things to lend; notifying all members of the cast when rehearsals were called, and seeing that each one was on hand; diplomatically trying to persuade old Mrs. Moon, who had a disconcerting habit of snapping hungrily every time her false teeth slipped, that the real scholastic dignity of the character *Historia* would be much better expressed if Mrs. Moon abandoned her lines entirely and just *looked* the part; and being call boy, prompter, emergency stage hand, and general utility man.

Every one of these duties Ethelina undertook willingly, thrilled and devoted heart and soul to her great desire, an expression of the history and the spirit of a town she loved. She glowed with pride when before the dear ladies Mr. Jeffers referred to her with tender fondness as his "right hand man."

Why, work like that was play in such a cause!

Ethelina's heart beat painfully while she waited in the chambers of Judge William Brown, of the Europia County Court. She had chosen to call on the judge in chambers rather than at the comfortable house where he maintained the estate of widower. Ethelina thought it more in keeping with her dignity as a representative of the E. L. E. C. S.

Truly this was purely a business matter, she reasoned—one prompted by the most altruistic and high-minded motives. No personal interests, such as a desire to see Billy Brown, whose seat had been

across the aisle from her own in high school days, could be imputed to her.

In those long ago days Billy had been a stocky, light-hearted youth with curly hair. Ethelina desired at one time to be the woman who would rumple that hair fondly. That was one of the memories that returned to her now and brought a becoming blush to her cheek. Fancy rumpling the hair of a county court judge!

Billy Brown's hair was white now, and Billy had grown into a stocky and somewhat portly middle-aged dignitary. He had mourned his late wife for these last ten years with beautiful consistency.

A subdued stirring behind a closed door told the caller that Judge Brown had adjourned court. In spite of her intention to maintain a becoming and modest dignity, she was on her feet when the door opened and the judge hurried in, his short arms waving as he slipped out of the black robe of office.

"Ethelina!" he cried, and, seizing her hand, held it with enthusiasm while he led her to a chair. "Why, this is an unexpected pleasure! I've seen mighty little of you all these years." His look grew sharper, more anxious. "I hope it's not business—you're not in any trouble?"

"Oh, no, Bill—no, judge, no, indeed! It's a business call—I mean a matter of public interest, something which, I am sure, will appeal at once to a man who has the welfare of dear Europia so close to his heart—"

Ethelina hesitated, and groped about for the neat opening she had rehearsed.

Judge Brown sat behind his business desk. Without his robes he looked not quite so impressive, and a little more like the stocky, irrepressible youth who had been wont to beau Ethelina to high school dances before his interest centered in another girl. From the other side of the desk, where the clear light from a north window illuminated her flushed face and bright eyes, Ethelina spoke of the current activity of the E. L. E. C. S., and incidentally revealed something of her own enthusiasms and dreams.

"Why, Ethel," said the judge, "I never guessed that anybody else in this town cared so much about the old place."

"You do," Ethelina ventured shrewdly. Billy Brown beamed.

"It's been a sort of hobby of mine, especially since Amy died. A man's got to

have something to fill up his lonely years, and—well, I was always interested in the town, and I've collected quite a lot of notes on its early history, thinking some day maybe I'd try my hand at a book. I—why, looking at it the way you and I do, it's kind of dramatic, even if it is just the history of a commonplace little burgh."

"But it isn't a commonplace little burgh!" Ethelina blushed at her temerity and added: "Anyhow, I don't think so."

"Say, Ethel, that's the talk! No more do I," the judge agreed. "You tell the ladies I'll be glad to do anything I can to help things along. Anything special you had in mind?"

Ethelina mentioned Rodeo, the judge's white horse, and a loan of it was readily promised. It was thus that Judge Brown was enlisted, *ex officio*, among the cultured ladies of Europa.

III

EUPHEMIA MARTIN had finished her speech in the character of *Cultura*, a lady who had much to say concerning the remarkable intellectual advance scored by Europa in the fifty years of its existence. Mrs. Martin was one of the few ladies in the cast who needed no prompting and very little technical advice from Mr. Jeffers. On all occasions she was equal to her task and as cool as the proverbial *cucumis sativus*.

Smiling democratically, she floated off the stage and joined Ethelina, who held the prompt book.

"How does it seem to you, my dear?" Mrs. Martin inquired.

Ethelina gasped earnestly.

"When they have their costumes, I'm certain it will seem quite different. Truly I think it's going to be quite wonderful!" Ethelina devoutly hoped it would be wonderful, though she had her moments of doubt. "Oh!" she gasped now. "It's *Historia* next, isn't it? Oh, dear!"

From the stage of the E. L. E. C. S. clubhouse Mr. Jeffers also prompted:

"*Historia!* Mrs. Moon, if you please, dear lady!"

Mrs. Moon, mild, middle-aged, and absent-minded, started from a vague dream and snapped hungrily at her false teeth. Ambling down toward her audience, she had something of the look and manner of a mild, woolly sheep. She had insisted on retaining her lines, despite all Ethelina's

diplomacy. Since Mr. Moon owned the town trucking business, and the club was indebted to him for the three trucks to be used as floats on the great day, it had been considered wise not to press the matter too far.

"I am *Historia*," Mrs. Moon began, with the milky mildness of a little girl reciting in school. "Upon my tablets are inscribed—"

"A little louder, please," said Jeffers. "Endeavor to throw the voice, dear lady. Throw it as one would toss a ball—so." Mr. Jeffers said "so" in a tone so illustrative that even persons passing along the street took notice.

Mrs. Moon snapped her teeth, not viciously, but expertly, taking a firmer grip upon the upper plate.

"Upon my tablets are inscribed legends—" she began, without varying her mildness a degree.

"Throw it, Mrs. Moon!" Mr. Jeffers murmured anxiously, and gracefully pantomimed a Greek discus thrower at his favorite sport.

Mrs. Moon came to a full stop, fascinated by the grace of Mr. Jeffers's gesture. Returning to business with a quiver, she opened her mouth, snapped her teeth, but stuck dead.

"Legends," Ethelina prompted helpfully.

"Legends," said Mrs. Moon dutifully, and paused again. "Oh, yes—now I remember! Upon my tablets are inscribed legends of the mighty men of yore, such stuff as empires are built upon, everlasting witness to the unconquerable spirit of Blank—"

"Not *blank*, dear lady," Mr. Jeffers interrupted anxiously. "Europa!"

"But it was 'Blank' in the book I learned from, Mr. Jeffers," reasoned Mrs. Moon.

"Of course, dear lady! Naturally!" Mr. Jeffers had gone through this explanation many times with Mrs. Moon, but he attacked it with unfailing patience and high good humor. "The copy given you does say '*Blank*.' That is to permit the player to insert the name of whatever city the pageant is given in. Now we are concerned with Europa, you see, and naturally—"

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Moon sighed. "You see, I learned to say it that way—learned it off by heart; but I'm sure when the day

comes, and I'm in costume, everything will come out all right."

"Of course it will," Mr. Jeffers agreed heartily.

Mrs. Moon heaved a profound sigh and returned to the past glories of *Europia*, and Mr. Jeffers turned over his manuscript to Ethelina. As usual, he was pounced upon by one of the dear ladies, this time Mrs. Clara Steele Perkins. She drew him aside with a confidential hand on his arm.

"I just wanted to whisper to you, dear Mr. Jeffers," she purred. "You're a great comfort to a mother!"

She beamed coquettishly at him, and Robert Jefferson Jeffers blinked. Few times in his career had he been called a mother's comfort.

"I'm going to confide in you," Mrs. Perkins said. The ladies were always confiding in him. "You've been so wonderful to Polly! You've done so much for her! I—I do hope that you will sustain her interest in the higher things of life by feeling that you can give her the part of the *Spirit of Europia* when the time comes, Mr. Jeffers. She's just a different girl since she had this new interest. You know young girls, Mr. Jeffers." Mr. Jeffers nodded. He did, indeed, know many young girls. "You know that they will get absurd fancies for—for impossible people. Last month I had to be very stern with Polly. She was swept off her feet, Mr. Jeffers, by a young man in no sense her equal. Young Joe Harley, an ordinary, common clerk in the Emporium—and my Polly! Oh, Mr. Jeffers, a mother's heart—"

Mr. Jeffers was gazing dreamily toward Barbara Winburn and Polly Perkins. They stood at the back of the auditorium, giggling together. They were usually giggling. They giggled at Mrs. Moon, they giggled at the E. L. E. C. S.; they giggled at the serious business of the pageant; they even giggled at Mr. Jeffers. He thought they were the most giggly girls, and two of the most charming girls, that he had ever known. On the dark sea of his work, they shone like the bright midsummer sun. Sometimes he felt that they might restore to him the youth he had lost training club women in pageantry. He was only twenty-seven, but his cares had weighed heavily on him.

Ethelina's sweet voice could be heard prompting Mrs. Moon. Ethelina had been

made the official prompter, and she already knew every part in the pageant. Dear Ethelina! She had taken a full half of the work from Mr. Jeffers's shoulders. He glanced affectionately at her, and made his way to the back of the auditorium, to join the girls.

Barbara Winburn laid a proprietary hand on his arm, and he was instantly swept into a young and joyous conversation which had little to do with the pageant. Barbara and Polly, while rivals for the leading rôle, gave the matter much less thought than their mothers. The pageant, to them, was merely a new way of having a wonderful time. Barbara had confided to Polly that she had never known such an attractive man as Robert Jefferson Jeffers—not even young Dr. Pugsley Ransom, who for a year had been her most ardent suitor.

Jeffers, with a sigh of peace and delight, gave himself up to the charming gigglers.

Back on the stage, Ethelina assisted Mrs. Moon through the last of her speech. Mrs. Moon would never know her lines! Ethelina sighed with weariness and nerve strain. How did Mr. Jeffers bear up under all this so serenely? Even now he was talking and laughing easily and naturally with Barb Winburn and Polly Perkins, just as if there was no thought of the pageant in his mind!

Ethelina saw him as an example, a shining illustration of calm serenity set as a torch to light her dark way. She, too, must be brave and strong, like Mr. Jeffers.

Over in a quiet corner of the club room a group of men were keeping one another company in their misery. They were the male members of the cast—husbands, brothers, and sons pressed into service by ladies of the E. L. E. C. S.

Tom Martin, lean and lantern-jawed, glared at the spectacle on the stage and muttered daringly to those near him:

"Damned nonsense! I've a mind to tell Euphemia so. Lot of middle-aged women making spectacles of themselves!"

"What are you, Tom?" young Dr. Pugsley Ransom queried, with a grin.

Martin grunted scornfully.

"I'm *Phoenix*," he said. "I have to tell about the time when the mill burned, back in eighty-four."

"*Phoenix*! Lord, that's a bird! Got to wear wings?"

"Naw—a Roman helmet; but of course

I may be called out of town on important business."

Martin's saturnine face altered into a swift and meaning wink that brought a gasp of admiration from other harassed souls. Here was spirit!

But Pug Ransom laughed nastily.

"You won't be," he said. "You're licked, Tom, and you know it. You'll wear a tin oil can on your head and speak your piece. So will I. I'm the *Spirit of Sanitation*, and have to wear a nightgown with a red cross on it. Well, I don't give a hoot. I'll make a guy out of myself, because I figure it's good publicity for the health department, and this town has got to get used to spending money on sanitation."

Pug Ransom, a former college half back, was Europia's new commissioner of health. As he talked, his eyes kept straying to Barbara Winburn.

A mild and hesitating voice joined in—the voice of Ellsworth Pringle, who was already suffering tortures at thought of the day when he would be called upon to interpret the *Spirit of the Old West*.

"The way I look at it," he said, from the outer edge of the circle, "this is a real nice thing for the ladies. It's—well, it's a kind of a healthy interest, like—"

"Nice thing!" Martin snorted. "There's just one guy this is a nice thing for, and that's him up there on the platform. I mean Jeffers. Gets a thousand hard iron men for making us all this trouble. That lad's got a brain!"

"Yeah, and he's got a way with the girls," another voice chimed in. "Barb Winburn and Polly Perkins are hit pretty hard, if you ask me."

Pug Ransom's strong jaw clicked. A thoughtful narrowing of his steely gray eyes declared that he was intensely interested in this item of news. Presently he moved away from the group and slipped back stage.

IV

THE clubhouse clock indicated the near approach of midnight when Mr. Jeffers, clapping his hands sharply to get attention, dismissed the cast for the night and reminded them of the next rehearsal call. Strolling back stage, he ran squarely into Dr. Pugsley Ransom.

Dr. Ransom had planted himself in a shadowy spot and maneuvered the collision

deftly. Mr. Jeffers, who was slight in build, had much the same sensation as a man who runs full tilt into a concrete wall.

"What the—I'm sorry," said Mr. Jeffers, stepping aside.

The solid young doctor laid a firm hand on the pageantry director's arm.

"Want a word with you," he said.

"Why, certainly, doctor!"

"This way," said Pug Ransom.

Still grasping Mr. Jeffers's arm, he led him toward the privacy of the clubhouse kitchen stairway. Under a dim light they paused, Mr. Jeffers eager, keen, alert, and unsuspecting; Dr. Ransom wide and thick and massive, six feet two of him, and every inch grim and forbidding. Mr. Jeffers felt an uneasiness which he could not yet define.

"Listen!" said Pug. "I'm no pageantry expert, but I have one suggestion to make."

"My dear chap, some of the best suggestions I ever heard have come from amateurs. Shoot it!"

"My suggestion concerns you personally. It's for the good of your health."

Mr. Jeffers wondered if he really looked as overworked as he sometimes felt. Had the medical man noticed his pallor, his nervous, haggard, morning-after manner?

The young and bulky doctor looked strangely grim. He was beginning to breathe hard. He gripped Mr. Jeffers's arm fiercely and muttered, close to his ear:

"Stick to pageantry work, Jeffers. Get me?"

"No, I don't quite, doctor."

"Then I'll make it clearer. There's a young girl in your cast, Miss Winburn. I've known Barb since we were kids. She's a lively youngster, friendly and fond of fun; but get this—she's going to be Mrs. Pugsley Ransom some time soon. What I mean, Jeffers, maybe you wouldn't understand, being an outsider, but Barb is my girl, and I don't mean maybe. In other words"—Pug Ransom was breathing harder all the time, and the grip of his big hand threatened Mr. Jeffers's comfort—"in other words, if I ever again catch you saying more than a civil good morning to Miss Winburn, the ladies of this club are going to miss a dear little playmate, and the emergency hospital will get a real, first-rate case of assault and battery to experiment on. Lay off the girl, or I'll beat you to a pulp!"

Robert Jefferson Jeffers stared up into the grim, fighting face of the young health commissioner. Dr. Ransom was twice his size, and all sinew and bone. Mr. Jeffers knew without experimenting that Pug Ransom could take him all apart with his bare hands and scatter the pieces beyond hope of repair. Nevertheless, he looked Ransom in the eye and said, fairly steadily:

"That's the way you feel about it, is it?"

"It certainly is."

"But you're not married to Miss Winburn? You just hope to be?"

"Not hope—*mean* to be. Do you follow me?"

Mr. Jeffers laughed suddenly.

"Follow you? Boy, I'm three jumps ahead of you all the way!"

"Then don't forget," Pug said solemnly.

"I won't forget," Mr. Jeffers promised.

A moment later Mr. Jeffers returned to the stage. He was mopping his brow on a silk handkerchief, and looked very thoughtful. He spied Ethelina, who had lingered to write out a list of various points of which Mr. Jeffers had reminded her to remind him. The director's face brightened.

"Dear lady," he said, "I have a prescription for you. You need rest. Let me see you safely home!"

"Why—why, Mr. Jeffers!"

Ethelina actually blushed. Nobody had asked to see her home for years—that is, nobody except Ellsworth Pringle, who was always kind-hearted when she chanced to be a guest at the Pringles' house; and Ellsworth didn't count.

There was a fine moon, and Mr. Jeffers spoke of it. He spoke of many things, not forgetting the splendid spirit Ethelina was putting into her work for the glory of Europa. She began to think that nowhere was there a man more kindly, more informed, more thrilling than clever Mr. Jeffers.

They paused at Ethelina's door, shaded by woodbine. She was all excitement. Moonlight, springtime, a handsome, eager young beau!

"Miss Perry," Mr. Jeffers said thoughtfully, "I am going to be quite confidential with you, if you will grant me that boon."

"Mr. Jeffers, of course—"

"Not Mr. Jeffers, please. Won't you call me Robert, and won't you, I beg, dear

lady, allow me to call you Ethelina? Ethelina! The name in itself is music!"

"I—I'll be proud to, Robert," Ethelina replied shyly. "You—had something to tell me?"

Mr. Jeffers hesitated. Suddenly he abandoned the suavity of his professional manner. He spoke hurriedly and earnestly, and, facing Ethelina in the moonlight, he looked boyish and honest in his desperation.

"It's rotten to have to mention this to you, Miss Perry! I'm troubled about money. I need some money just now like the very devil—ready cash, I mean. You know I get a thousand dollars for this job—five hundred in advance, and the other half when the pageant is over. Well, I need that other five right now. I'm in a tight hole!"

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Jeffers—Robert! What can I do?"

"If I was in New York, I could raise the money in half an hour. It's just a matter of a loan for a few days, anyway. Of course the old—of course the ladies will come across with my five hundred as soon as the show is over."

Secretly Ethelina wondered a little at Mr. Jeffers's optimism. Sometimes it was more than a few days before the E. L. E. C. S., harassed by a mortgage and a multitude of current bills, settled its obligations to imported talent.

"Anyway, I'd pay it back inside of a week," Mr. Jeffers went on earnestly. "I'd assign my claim on the club as security; but I've got to get my hands on the ready cash right now. If you could suggest somebody who would—you know the town so well, Miss Perry!"

Ethelina wondered innocently who in Europa could be persuaded to advance Mr. Jeffers five hundred dollars on the dot. Who, indeed? One after another she was obliged to discard her candidates.

In the desperation of his need, Mr. Jeffers shot his last bolt.

"I honestly don't know how I can finish my work here without that help. I'm sure there must be some person, some loyal soul who has the good of the town and the success of the E. L. E. C. S. at heart—"

Those words woke a responsive chord in Ethelina. Why not? She had five hundred dollars—more than that—in the bank. She had a fixed income and saved money; and Mr. Jeffers did look so young and

troubled and appealing! She hesitated, blushed at her boldness, and finally stammered her offer.

For a moment Robert Jefferson Jeffers drew away, frankly upset by the notion. Then he grasped her hand and wrung it hard.

"You—you're a brick!" he said in a voice full of emotion. "This means a lot to me—your friendship and all—more than you can imagine. Oh, thanks!"

V

ETHELINA moved as in a daze. Here it was, the great day itself, the morning that she had anticipated throughout a fortnight of sleepless nights! The pageant had actually reached the stage of a dress rehearsal—and she felt nothing. She was too much numbed with work and excitement to feel at all. She had worn out her capacity to thrill. She only knew that the hour was already half past ten, and that Mr. Jeffers—Robert, though she could hardly bring herself to call him that—had not yet arrived to direct affairs.

Really, somebody must take charge. Nobody but Ethelina seemed to realize that. Time was flying, the dress rehearsal positively must be held, and the all-important matter, the vital question of who should be the *Spirit of Europa*, must be settled.

Ethelina was glad she didn't have to settle that last problem, but she could take charge of the rehearsal, for she knew the prompt book backward by now. Rather frightened at her own temerity, she suggested the idea to Euphemia Martin.

"Capital!" the lady president exclaimed. "Dear Ethelina, I was about to suggest that myself. I really cannot understand about Mr. Jeffers. I've sent twice to his hotel and telephoned three times without success." Mrs. Martin's face clouded with annoyance and apprehension. "You don't suppose that the man is—er—undependable?"

"Oh, no!" Ethelina cried indignantly. "Oh, no, dear Mrs. Martin! Mr. Jeffers is—is a gentleman! He has been slightly troubled about a personal matter," she went on, thrilling to think that she alone really understood; "but I can assure you he is to be counted on."

"Do go ahead and call rehearsal, dear Ethelina! It certainly is time we did something," Mrs. Martin sighed, making a mental note to discover at more leisure what

Ethelina knew about Mr. Jeffers's personal problems.

Ethelina, upheld by her sense of duty to Europa, did what otherwise would have been an utter impossibility. She advanced to the middle of the platform, clapped her hands sharply, as Mr. Jeffers was wont to do, and announced that rehearsal would begin without the director's presence.

Various picturesque ladies in Greek, Roman, Indian, and early American costumes came to fluttering attention. Various unhappy gentlemen, who had taken a day off from their business to don clothes they loathed, sighed and submitted.

An imposing lady suggestive of a stately edifice in the purest classical style, Mrs. Hiram Hepburn Winburn sat aloof in robes of gold and silver cloth emblazoned with the symbols of the mason's craft; for she was the *Spirit of Architecture*. At the moment, however, she was thinking not of her lines, but of Mr. Jeffers. Did his tardiness indicate chicanery, a covert attempt to award the leading lady's rôle to that little chit, Polly Perkins?

Mrs. Winburn was thinking that the pageantry expert from New York had better not try any cheap political tactics on her. There was her husband's offer of five thousand dollars to pay off the club's mortgage. If Mr. Jeffers tried anything funny with her, the E. L. E. C. S. might not receive that splendid gift, and the director might have some trouble collecting the five hundred dollars still due him for his services.

Another who took notice of Mr. Jeffers's lateness was the *Pioneer Mother*—in other words, Mrs. Clara Steele Perkins, dressed up in a sunbonnet, a buckskin-fringed dress, and a bandanna neckerchief. Mrs. Perkins was thinking that Mr. Jeffers had better award the coveted rôle to her Polly, or even at this late hour the use of the Perkins property might be forbidden by outraged parents.

Mrs. Perkins was also wondering a little anxiously where Polly was. Her daughter had gone the night before to stay at Barbara Winburn's house. It was a common custom and an innocent one; but this morning neither Barbara nor Polly had put in an appearance. Could it be due to some trickery on the part of Mrs. Winburn, or was it merely that the girls, good friends in spite of their rivalry, both chose to be absent when the choice was made?

Ordinarily Mrs. Perkins would have settled her doubts by asking Mrs. Winburn, but this morning feeling was too bitter and tension too high for such an inquiry. If there was chicanery, or any evidence of it, let the Winburns take care! The Perkinses were snakes dangerous to tread upon!

To Ethelina Perry, the whole business of directing, prompting, and stage managing seemed in a hopeless muddle. Never since the first rehearsal had so many speeches been garbled or the stage business so scrambled. Never had old Mrs. Moon snapped so hungrily at her false teeth or spoken her lines so inaudibly. Never in Ethelina's moments of nightmare had she imagined that Ellsworth Pringle and Dr. Ransom and Tom Martin could look such utter guys in their costumes. Overtired, overstrained, she was on the verge of hysteria and tears.

Then she was faced with a new responsibility. Neither of the young girl candidates was present, and she would have to fill in as the *Spirit of Europa*. Too weary to be self-conscious, she took her place in the muddled pageant and repeated lines made familiar by countless promptings.

In the rear of the clubroom, one of a small group of favored spectators, Judge William Brown sat forward in his chair at Ethelina's appearance.

"Say," he whispered to a neighbor, "there's one woman you can hear when she talks! She's got kind of a spirit about her, too—notice that?"

The man addressed looked quizzically at the judge, thinking that the remark was intended humorously.

"Kind of too bad, an old maid making a spectacle of herself, ain't it?" he replied grinningly.

Then he realized that he had made a mistake, for William Brown gave him such a look as the judge usually reserved for men he sentenced for crimes of gross moral turpitude.

It was then that the telegraph boy, a youth of some sixty-five summers, entered the hall bearing four envelopes. One he presented to Mrs. Hiram Hepburn Winburn, one to Mrs. Clara Steele Perkins, one to Ethelina, and one to the lady president, Euphemia Martin.

Even in the excitement of a pageant the advent of four telegrams at once could not be missed entirely, and a sudden hush descended upon the general activities. What

was this—an announcement of Mr. Jeffers's choice, perhaps?

VI

FOUR ladies stared uncertainly at four telegraph envelopes. Euphemia Martin, always efficient, was first to scan her message and take action. She rose hastily, walked to the center of the stage, and raised her hand for silence. Mrs. Martin was that type of large, blond woman who can command silence by a gesture.

"I have news," announced the lady president in the calm, carrying voice that had so often and so ably settled the more or less turbulent affairs of the E. L. E. C. S. "This is a telegram from Mr. Robert Jefferson Jeffers, addressed to me as your president. Mr. Jeffers wires:

"Sorry I cannot take personal charge to-day—important business calls me away—strongly recommend that Miss Perry take my place—have every confidence in her ability—success to E. L. E. C. S. in this most important venture."

The silence that followed was the silence that descends upon a man who is so unfortunate as to be standing under a two-ton safe dropped from an eighteenth story window. Before Ethelina's dazed eyes the clubhouse swam dizzily. She take charge? She take Mr. Jeffers's place? Impossible!

Ethelina was aware that something else was happening. The *Pioneer Mother* was standing erect at the rear of the auditorium and asking the indulgence of the chair. The eyes of pseudo-Roman matrons, mythological and historical characters, and personified ideals turned full upon her, but Clara Steele Perkins maintained an admirable calm. Her face looked somewhat gray and a little ghastly, but her voice was steady.

"Madam president and ladies," she said, "I wish to make an announcement. Mr. Perkins and I are obliged to withdraw the name of our daughter from candidacy for the leading rôle. I'm sure that all our good friends in the dear E. L. E. C. S. will be interested to know that Polly was married this morning to Mr. Joseph Harley, of *Europa*."

Mrs. Perkins sat down.

The gasp that greeted this news found its echo in a choked, half hysterical cry from a lady of classical architecture who now rose hastily to her feet, quavering:

"Madam president!"

"Mrs. Winburn?" said the chair, func-

tioning by some triumph of the subconscious mind.

"Madam president, I—Barbara—Barbara *can't* take the part!" Mrs. Winburn gasped. "Barbara has—I, too, have a telegram. I—I'll read it." Mrs. Winburn's uncertain fingers dropped the message, and she had to scramble to recover it. "It—it says:

"Let Polly be the spirit—just married Mr. Jeffers—both supremely happy—home next week.—BARBARA."

In the silence that followed the *Spirit of Sanitation* rose and stalked out of the clubhouse. A block away Europaia's health commissioner suddenly remembered that he was curiously garbed, and stopped to tear off his white nightgown, emblazoned so bravely with a red cross upon its breast. He threw it upon the ground and jumped upon it. Then, standing under the elms of Pleasant Street, young Dr. Ransom delivered his opinion of Barbara and Mr. Jeffers loudly and luridly for the benefit of any who cared to hear.

Ethelina Perry also had received a telegram; but amid the general excitement nobody asked what it contained, and she did not volunteer to read her news to the world. Her message was from Robert Jefferson Jeffers, and it said:

Barbara and I bless you in our prayers—your kindness has made us supremely happy and we will not forget—please take my place directing to-day—you did the work and deserve all credit.

A mild hysteria was sweeping over Europaia's pageant. Mrs. Winburn and Mrs. Perkins had announced their total inability to go on with their respective parts. Immediately other lady members were clamoring for the ear of the chair, and the structure that took weeks of labor and care was crashing to earth in a cloud of dust and tears. Only the handful of harassed males were bearing it bravely. Hope and relief were dawning upon their faces.

Then it was that Ethelina came out of her daze.

Without waiting for the recognition of the chair or trifling with any formalities, she ran to the front of the platform and began to speak. Her face was flushed, her eyes bright, her voice commanding.

"You can't do this!" she cried. "You, Mrs. Winburn and Mrs. Perkins—all you ladies, listen to me! You can't drop out of this pageant now, I don't care who got

married or who they got married to! No matter how you feel about anything, you can't desert the cause and make our dear E. L. E. C. S. a laughing stock! This isn't something for your personal glory. It's for the club and for the town we love. It's for Europaia, and you can't desert Europaia!"

Ethelina turned to Mrs. Martin.

"Madam president," she cried, "I move you we lay all these resignations on the table and go ahead with our pageant. I don't believe for one instant that there isn't a lady member, no matter how heavy her personal burden of anxieties, but will give all she's got, gladly and loyally, for the honor and good name of the town we love and the club we love, our dear E. L. E. C. S.!"

"Second that motion!" shouted a voice from the rear of the room—a man's voice. "All in favor say aye!"

Judge Brown, entirely forgetful that he was not and never could be a member of the Europaia Ladies' Ethical Culture Society, was on his feet and in command. A chorus of "ayes" rolled up in joyous clamor. For the honor of Europaia the day was saved.

"But who," Mrs. Martin stammered—"who can take the lead? What will we do for the *Spirit of Europaia* now?"

"Ethelina Perry!" Judge Brown shouted. "She's the only one of you that knows the part, anyhow."

"Ethelina!" the chorus repeated.
"Ethelina!"

Swept away by excitement, Ethelina Perry forgot her age, her history, and her natural timidity. With bright eyes and flushed cheeks, she answered with the spirit of a Joan of Arc:

"I'll do it!"

VII

LATE afternoon sunshine slanted across the main street of Europaia. It was a brilliant, cloudless day, and all the town lined the sidewalks, chewing gum, eating ice cream and popcorn, waiting for the great parade, to be followed by the pageant of the Europaia Ladies' Ethical Culture Society, much heralded, widely advertised, and brimming with local talent.

The Emporium, that up-to-date department store, was hung with flags and closed for the afternoon. Banners whipped the air all along the main street—in front of

Boone's drug store, the post office, the real estate building, the town hall. There was a constant murmur, with loud cries of "They're coming now!" The shrill note of the popcorn wagon whistle was heard.

The town clock on the city hall chimed four, and far down the street there was the sound of a band, playing a march. Necks were craned; here and there policemen pushed back such of the crowd as spilled off the sidewalks. And down the wide modern highway, which had been a cow path ninety years before, came the history of the little town, on horseback, on floats, or on foot.

Robert Jefferson Jeffers's universal pageant fitted Europa well enough. Here was the *Pioneer Mother*, here was the *Spirit of Culture*, here the *Spirit of Architecture*—twenty new office buildings in the last two years! What American town has not at some time in its history had a fire loss, still talked of, never forgotten? Here was *Phœnix* in the person of Tom Martin, newly risen from the ashes in a Roman helmet; and at the head of the procession proudly rode the *Spirit of Europa*.

The procession marched straight from the clubhouse of the Europa Ladies' Ethical Culture Society, soon to be free of debt, to the vacant lot donated by the husband of the *Pioneer Mother*, Clara Steele Perkins. The band played vigorously, and Ethelina Perry rode the great white horse at the head of them all. Her thin face uplifted, her body straight and proud, she rode. She was trembling, but more with happiness than with fright.

In a little while it would all be over. She would again be just Ethelina Perry, thirty-eight years old, whose pageant had not been accepted, whose bank account had been depleted by five hundred dollars which she might never recover—an old maid whom nobody needed, unimportant to Europa, to the Ladies' Ethical Culture Society, and to everybody else. For a few moments, however, clad all in white, her fine, tired eyes uplifted, she was Joan of Arc on her white charger. She was—and she looked it—the *Spirit of Europa*, the spirit of a hundred other towns sprung up on hills and prairies out of an untamed wilderness.

Triumphant, the pageant swept on to the vacant lot and passed within the canvas fence. The hastily erected benches filled with spectators.

For the last time Ellsworth Pringle, his small figure shaking inside of his roomy cowboy suit, spoke his lines as the *Spirit of the Old West*. For the last time Mrs. Euphemia Martin was poised and serene as *Culture*. For the last time Mrs. Hiram Hepburn Winburn, her eyes still slightly red from weeping over an ungrateful daughter, intoned her remarks on architectural progress.

A group of slender, long-legged little girls danced the dance of the wood nymphs. Old Mrs. Moon, with final snatches at her lively upper set, sweetly murmured *Historia's* boasts, heightening her effect by using either "Blank" or "Europia" as memory served. For the first and last time Ethelina Perry voiced the *Spirit of Europa*, her high, clear tones ringing through the sudden hush, her eyes lifted, her passionate devotion to the town breathing in every word she spoke.

"I am the *Spirit of Europa*," she said. "Through storm and fire, through poverty and wealth, I shine!"

She did indeed shine. More than one business man, to whom the spirit of Europa was no more or less than opportunity, wiped his eyes or blew his nose. Judge William Brown's face was flushed. He shouted and tossed up his new straw hat like a boy when Ethelina had finished. There was a storm of hand clapping. Ethelina was the hit of the show.

The program swept on to its close. The last notes of the last song died on the air. The pageant was over.

VIII

ETHELINA PERRY sat on the porch of the boarding house where for ten years she had had the large room upstairs, front.

The moon was sailing overhead. There was a faint breeze stirring the trees. Ethelina was alone. The other boarders had gone their several ways, and the landlady and her family were attending a movie.

Ethelina was tired. She leaned back wearily in the porch swing, her eyes half closed. There was a faint smile on her lips. In the moonlight she looked almost young and pretty.

The pageant had been very successful. It had brought honor to Europa. It had gone off almost without a hitch, and the clubhouse mortgage would be lifted tomorrow at ten o'clock. The gate receipts had exceeded expectations, and Mrs. Eu-

phemia Martin was already in possession of Hiram Winburn's check.

Ethelina was happy when she thought of these things. She was happy, too, when she thought of the two lovely young girls, Polly Perkins and Barbara Winburn, now on their honeymoons with a lifetime of love and happiness opening out before them.

She knew Joe Harley, Polly's husband. He was a nice, honest boy, who had always been very attentive and polite when Ethelina went into the Emporium. Mr. Jeffers—Robert—was a fine young man, too. She was glad she had been able to help him with her five hundred dollars.

She was happy when she thought of the beautiful things that had been said to her about the way she pulled the pageant together, and how she rode the white horse. She was happy when she thought of that white horse. She hadn't ridden since she was a girl, and that was a long, long time ago. Judge Brown had been wonderfully generous, lending her Rodeo, and helping so much all through the pageant. He was a fine man—a splendid man!

And then, suddenly, Ethelina felt very lonely.

It was all over, and she was thirty-eight, and life, the great pageant, had undoubtedly passed her by.

The front gate clicked. A returning boarder, Ethelina thought, and forgot the sound until a step sounded on the porch and a man spoke.

"I beg your pardon, is Miss—well, Ethelina!"

The caller was Judge Brown. He had come to call on her, and no one else.

He was almost shy as he drew a chair beside the porch swing and laid his new straw hat carefully away. He was just passing, said the judge, on his way home. He had been thinking of Ethelina since the pageant. He wanted to tell her how

great she had looked riding Rodeo and saying her lines. It had been a real red-letter day in Europa's history, and if the town didn't realize that it had Ethelina Perry to thank for its success, he, Judge Brown, was going to see that it did!

All this and more the judge said. It seemed amazing nonsense, but it came from the lips of a judge of the county court, and surely a judge ought to know!

Gradually Judge Brown ran out of conversation.

In a panic of hospitality Ethelina tried to make talk, but it didn't help much. She realized with a pang that she had no social small talk. She had been out of practice so long, and was so timid about herself. She was perfectly sure that Judge Brown would take his new hat and go at any second, and she didn't want him to go.

Then out of the frightening awkwardness Judge Brown spoke again, more nervous and hesitant than Ethelina herself. He was trying to explain something, and doing it badly—trying to explain that he was a lonely man who lived in a big, lonely house, and that he often thought about the girl whom he had known so well in high school days, and sometimes he wished—God's mercy! Judge Brown was asking her to marry him!

Ethelina lacked the voice to say anything when Billy Brown entreated her to answer. Her lips were numb; her heart leaped like a mouse in a cage. Like a woman in a nightmare, she was bereft of speech and motion. She was terrified lest she should be unable to speak, and the judge might go away, thinking her cold to his plea. Then she saw that head of curly hair close by her hand, and her hand dared what her lips could not say.

After all the years Ethelina had realized her desire. She was the woman to rumple Billy Brown's curls, and all was well between them.

THE PENCIL MAN

You haven't any legs, but you've a jolly face—
No, that is not the word; your face is brave.
You've somehow learned to smile without an outward trace
Of grief or bitterness for what life gave.

Well, brave-faced pencil man, close to the busy street,
You know life's values, and I'd like to know
Just what you think of those who pass on sturdy feet
And fret at life, and grumble, as they go!

Charlotte Mish.

The Wolves of St. Votique

THE STRANGE STORY OF KIND-HEARTED NOEL CARON, WHO
SYMPATHIZED WITH ALL WILD ANIMALS, BUT WHO
WAS HELD UNDER A TERRIBLE SUSPICION
BY THE PEOPLE OF HIS VILLAGE

By William Merriam Rouse

IN the year of the great snows Noel Caron was the one man of St. Votique who did not greet the morning with sadness and the evening with at least a little shiver of dread. The weight of the snow that lay upon the land to a depth of six or seven feet did not lie upon the soul of Caron. When the day's work was done, he played his violin.

The strange coming of the wolves, made desperate by starvation, did not terrify him. Perhaps it was because of the violin that he kept fear out of his heart, and some happiness in it. Certainly he remained calm in spite of dark looks and whispers when he refused to mourn with the frightened ones of the village.

He might, indeed, have been quite happy, if it had not been for Susanne Gervais.

Noel felt that Susanne had some doubt about him, but he did not know just what it was. Therefore misery touched him, notwithstanding his courage and his music; for no violin can take the place of the kisses a man should have from the woman he loves.

His violin was, after all, no more than a confessional into which Noel poured his sorrow, and from which he received a degree of comfort. It was not Susanne.

As for Susanne of the bright lips and the great hazel eyes, she was the daughter of a well-to-do *habitant*, and thereby somewhat removed from a *bûcheron*, a wood chopper, who earned his living with the ax and owned nothing more than a house and the ground it stood on. This obstacle, in itself, was not impossible to overcome, if Susanne had desired it; but for Noel she wore a dozen different masks—smiles,

frowns, and complete indifference to his existence.

It was as if she fought a battle within herself, and Noel did not know which of these masks, if any of them, was the girl's real face. He knew only that she did not know him.

All his other troubles were no more than a dull ache, but Susanne was a thrust of agony; for Caron knew that never, in the long years to come, could he love another woman.

On a morning when the pale sunlight and the blue sky seemed to mock St. Votique, lying three-quarters buried in snow and wholly sunk in gloom, Noel Caron was chopping firewood on an upward ranging slope within sight of the village. He worked with the words of a *chanson* on his lips, for it is necessary to be gay when there is pain in the heart.

Already there was a long rank of wood, cut in three-foot lengths according to the custom of Quebec; but not all the labor of Caron that morning had been given to cutting the fuel which was worth so much this winter. He had just felled a worm-eaten hickory, of no value, and at considerable expense of time he had chopped it into small pieces, which he split almost to the size of stovewood.

Now he stood with a rather remarkably broad pair of shoulders resting against the rank of solid beech and maple, and watched a flock of chickadees busily at work among the chips and the split pieces of hickory. They were finding plenty of worms. Caron, so lean that he would have seemed fragile but for his broad shoulders, was nevertheless pleasant to look at as he watched the

birds. His rugged face lighted, and a smile shone out of deep set blue eyes.

"There's one meal for them, anyway!" he said to the forest.

Upon that bitterly cold air his voice rode like the clang of metal. For days without number it had been cold like this, and it seemed now that even the sunlight had frozen. The chimneys of St. Votique still smoked, but the piles of wood were growing less, and there were no longer choppers in the village who would go into the bush alone, as Caron did. Moreover, so deep was the snow that the wood roads were blocked beyond the power of horses to draw a load.

But for the talking of the birds there was no sound on the hillside, nor was there any movement. From the far blue haze to the south, where lay the frozen St. Lawrence, to the ascending peaks of the Laurentians behind him, Noel could see no stir of man or beast, and could hear no sound except the occasional pistol-like report of a branch that snapped under the strain of the frost. Despite this, he felt that something, or some one, was near.

Caron put a mittened hand on the rank of firewood and vaulted to the top. He stood erect, straight as a pine against the sky. It had known, that instinct which had spoken to him! Close to the little clearing that he had made was Susanne Gervais, handling her snowshoes with that ease which made her the envy of every other girl in the parish.

Caron watched with appreciation, for they said in St. Votique that he must have been born with a pair of *raquettes* on his feet, so great was his skill with them.

Here was a girl who climbed without puffing, and who looked straight into a man's eyes when she talked to him. Noel saw the little black curls which had slipped out from under her red tuque; and for a moment he allowed himself to delight in the rhythm of her movements, as she threaded among the trees and came out into his clearing. He dropped to the trampled snow and lifted his hand in salute.

"*Bonjour, Susanne!*" he said, with a smile and no small astonishment that she should be there.

She stopped, and stared at him with a curious expression, while he delighted himself by looking at her as he waited for her to speak. He found joy in the beautiful line of her chin, in the clear pallor of her

cheeks. Susanne was a fine contrast to some of the girls of St. Votique, who were too broad and rosy.

"Do you know," she began suddenly, with a forced calm, "that they would have stopped me from leaving the village, if it had been known that I was coming into the bush? Do you realize that it is not safe for any one but an armed man, even in the daytime, to go out of St. Votique?"

"Wolves?" asked Noel, already knowing the answer. "Am I deaf, that I have not heard the prattle of the old women in trousers?"

Susanne stood with parted lips, a puzzled line growing upon her forehead. Leaning upon his ax, Noel smiled at her, and wished he might cross the little distance between them to take her in his arms; but he knew too well the opinion Susanne would hold of that experiment.

"Do you know that they are short of wood and food in St. Votique?" she asked. "Have you been so busy fiddling half the night that you do not know trappers have left their lines and come in, and that the choppers for a day's march to the north have abandoned their camps on account of the wolves?"

"Certainly I know these things!" Caron twirled his ax so that the keen blade flashed in the sun. "That is why I fiddle more than ever—to forget them!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" For a moment the girl seemed at a loss how best to go on. "The wolves run in packs this year. Never before have so many come down from the north. You are a woodsman, and you know it is not the habit of these wolves of ours to run in packs."

"All this I know," answered Noel, more concerned with the colorful depths of her eyes than with thought of the wolves. "They hunt in threes, usually—two for the attack in front, and one to creep up in the rear. At least, that is how they attack a man."

"How do you know how they attack a man?" she cried, suddenly breathless, and leaning forward with clenched hands.

"For a very good reason," replied Caron, lifting his brows in mild astonishment. "Once or twice they have thought that I would make a good dinner for them."

"And you shot one or two, of course!" she said in a low voice.

"Maybe," laughed Noel, balancing the

ax very neatly on the palm of his mitten. "They are foolish animals, these wolves!"

"Noel," said Susanne, with something close to a break in her voice, "I wish I knew what to think of you! Perhaps, in that case, I'd know what to say. Anyhow, I am going to tell you something. Have you any idea what they are saying about you in the village?"

"There have been some strange looks lately," he exclaimed, with a touch of pain in voice and eyes. "Probably it is nothing very good, because I am not a sheep, like the rest!"

"They are saying that you are *loup-garou*!"

There was silence between them; and into that silence came only the talk of the little birds as they hurried about their pleasant work of cleaning the worm-eaten hickory. Caron stood rigid, frowning and staring into the troubled face of Susanne Gervais. Now he understood the strangeness of her manner, knew why she had come up here to find him, and realized the import of all her talk of wolves.

There are those who believe that sometimes, for his sins, a man becomes *loup-garou*—that is, he becomes a wolf by night and runs the bush. He is a great danger to any human being whom he meets; for the *loup-garou* can be freed only when he is wounded by human hand, and therefore he attacks all whom he meets, in the hope that he will be wounded. A man by day and a wolf by night, his soul is in bondage until his blood is shed by man.

"As for you, Susanne"—Noel paused to steady himself, for it might not be easy to hear the answer to this question—"as for you, do you believe that I am *loup-garou*?"

"Me?" she cried. "Of course not! Father Larocque laughs at such folly, and have I not been three years in the convent? I am talking of St. Votique, and what is said by men and women who do not know any better. *Bon Dieu*, when people are scared they will believe anything; and they have always feared the *loup-garou*, in their hearts."

"That is true," agreed Noel.

"You are a strange man, and you have made them suspect you," she told him. "You take your violin and go into the bush alone, without a rifle. You are quite mad! Mayor Giroux says that last fall he saw you sitting on a stump and playing to

the moon. It was very late at night. While he watched, your ears and your nose lengthened out, and you became a wolf."

"Remarkable!" cried Noel bitterly. "Why didn't he tell of it before? Do you think he believes that, Susanne?"

"Without doubt, if he has told it enough times. Others believe it, too. You make them believe it. Have you your rifle here now, for protection?"

"I did not think of it," he chuckled. "Did you bring a gun?"

"Noel, I must tell you the worst," she said; "otherwise you will laugh until it is too late. Last night the wolves broke into the barn of Henri Patenaude, who lives at the edge of the village, and pulled down his cow. He was afraid to go out, or even to shoot, for fear they would attack the house. It was moonlight, as you know, and Mayor Giroux saw the pack running. He hints that you were the leader. They will do something to you, if you do not save yourself."

Caron had been up and in the bush too early to hear of this. He was surprised, but not yet greatly concerned for himself. Thoughts went flashing through his mind, connecting things.

"Our mayor sees me running with the wolf pack, and he is a very great friend of Adolphe Lucas, who, Susanne, is not indifferent to you!"

A delicate pink came and vanished from her cheeks. She was too gravely concerned with this matter of the *loup-garou* to trouble with jealousies.

"It is not one man, but the terror of fifty families, that you have to fear, Noel. They will do anything to rid themselves of the wolves!"

"Why did you come up here?" asked Caron, abruptly.

"To save you, if possible," she replied promptly.

"Susanne!" Noel moved slowly toward her. "Will you marry me?"

"Marry?" she echoed. "You are certainly mad, Noel! Do you think my parents would allow it, even if I wanted to marry you?"

"There are other villages." He had stopped, but his hands were still held out to her. "It is but a day's march to Pointe des Monts."

"A journey that no man will take until the cold breaks and the wolves go," she said. "St. Votique is besieged by cold,

by hunger, by wild beasts, with Heaven alone knows what other dangers to come, and you talk of marriage!"

"If we could go to Pointe des Monts with our hearts free from fear, would you marry me?" he asked.

For the first time the eyes of Susanne turned from him. She looked away, over the village, toward the blue haze of the south. He saw a tear gather and move slowly down her cheek, and a ripple cross the firm brown of her throat.

"I cannot, Noel," she told him, with a sob in her voice.

He stepped closer to her and lifted one of her small deerskin mittens in his hand. He pressed it against his cheek and let it go gently from him.

"Will you tell me why, Susanne?"

"It is because—because you are strange, Noel. When other men would fight, you smile. It is not that I like fighting—no; but what is it that is in you? Is it strength? Was it not last year that you saw a silver-gray fox, you with a rifle in your hands, and let him go? They tell that in the village; and why do you go into the bush at night to play your violin?"

For a full minute Noel Caron did not answer her. He stood gazing at her, but he was seeing other things—silver-gray puppies at play, with the mother watching close by—the anguish of a saw-toothed steel trap. He knew why his folly was not like that of trapper and *habitant*, but how could he find words to tell her?

"I go into the bush to hear the pines," he said lamely. "That is one reason. They sing to me, and I turn their music into my own. You have liked to hear it, Susanne!"

"That is only a little bit of an answer," she replied, shrugging.

"Perhaps I can say more—" began Caron, and then he ceased speaking.

A man had come out of the woods. He was striding toward them with mighty legs, and with a black scowl upon his massive face. Adolphe Lucas had followed Susanne—Lucas, friend of the mayor, a man who could lift more than any two in St. Votique. He was making money as a wood buyer, and his eyes had been upon Susanne ever since she came home from the convent. A big man, handsome in spite of his bulkiness, he occupied a certain place in the parish, for he was one whom even the simplest *habitant* could understand.

He carried a rifle in the crook of his

arm, and he threw a swift, apprehensive glance over his shoulder before he gave his attention wholly to Susanne and Noel.

"Caron!" he began, in a tone that approached a roar. "This is no place for a woman!"

Noel lifted his shoulders and spread out his hands, and the faint hint of a smile drew little lines about his eyes.

"I did not bring Susanne here," he said; "but she is safe enough—even from the *loup-garou*!"

At that Lucas changed color, and his eyes, of a flat, impenetrable brown, stared angrily.

"So you make a joke of it! Susanne, I went to your house, and you had gone out. Then I found a boy who had seen you start toward the bush. Has he put a spell upon you, that fellow?"

Susanne laughed, but there was a break in her voice. She looked at Noel, then at Adolphe, and then at Noel, as if she were comparing and measuring the two men. They made a great contrast, Caron realized. He was long and lean, and unable to take the fear that was in the air seriously, while Lucas stood like a monument to all things solid—things like money, pork and potatoes, whisky *blanc*, and able-bodied wives. Noel chuckled at his own thoughts.

"Don't laugh!" said Susanne sharply. "Adolphe has taken the trouble to come for me."

"But you laughed!" he reminded her. "Is it not folly to think that I could put a spell upon any one?"

"He himself is under a spell," muttered Lucas. "There is a strange look in his eyes now!"

"It is the light of pleasure that comes from looking at Susanne," Noel told him. "Have you not felt the same way, *mon vieux*?"

The arm that held the rifle twitched, and dull red again glowed under the brown of Adolphe's cheeks. It was clear that he was close to action.

"Be serious!" exclaimed Susanne. "You will not believe me when I tell you that you have reason to be serious."

"We are going to see to it that the wolves leave St. Votique," rumbled Lucas. "I can promise you that, Caron! And it may be a very good thing for you if they go at once!"

"I'll speak to them to-night," said Noel

solemnly. "I'll tell them that Adolphe Lucas is angry, and they'll run!"

The face of Lucas became purple with rage. His rifle fell to the snow as he sprang forward, with the evident intention of settling his grievances against Noel then and there. His knife flashed in his hand.

Susanne screamed. Noel flung a laugh at her. As long as the rifle lay there in the snow, he was in no danger. Lucas was not only more cumbersome of movement naturally, but he wore snowshoes, which were a hindrance here where the snow had been trampled and packed by Caron's *bottes sauvages*. Noel's feet were feather-light. He side-stepped the other man's rush, and his hand did not even seek his knife.

Then Susanne, recovering from the first shock of surprise, seized Adolphe's arm.

"Think what you are doing!" she cried.

Lucas halted and shook his head, as if to clear away the mists of wrath. Slowly he sheathed his knife. Either the temper of his mind changed or he saw the folly of trying to catch a man who was as elusive as a cat.

"You've scared the birds, Adolphe!" said Noel. "They were having a good time with the worms in that dead tree!"

"You can see that the man is a maniac, Susanne!" exploded Lucas. He picked up his rifle. "Come home with me! This fellow who wastes good time cutting down trees for birds will meet a proper end, and very soon!"

Susanne looked back as she moved away with reluctant feet, walking beside the bulk of Adolphe.

"Noel, you must do something!" she said.

Caron watched her, motionless and silent, until she and Lucas had disappeared among the trees. Then he lifted his face to the overarching blue and inspected it curiously, with the smoothness of his forehead wrinkled. In that vast, beautiful, and immaculate depth he found no answer to the questions that troubled him. After a little time he sighed and went back to his chopping.

"Must I become a wolf to be counted a man?" he said in a low voice. "Or is it that Susanne does not understand?"

II

THE first pale shadows of dusk were upon St. Votique, although it was not much

past mid afternoon, when Noel Caron came in from the bush with his ax in one hand and his snowshoes in the other. At the door of the shop of Xavier Thériault he halted and left his snowshoes, in order that the rawhide might not grow soggy with melting snow. He stuck them on end in a drift that curled gracefully from the hard-packed surface of the road to the ridgepole of the solid stone building.

The people of the parish were accustomed to the winters of the north, and to digging through drifts to their doors and windows, but not to being completely buried in snow. It was no wonder, Caron thought, that men were uneasy, or that so many wolves had come down from the country above the rivers.

Yellow lamplight streamed out bravely through the single window of the shop, and through small panes set in the stout door. When Noel went in, he was met by a rush of pleasant warmth and by the smoke of powerful *tabac Canadien*. The odors of coffee and spices greeted him, while delicious whiffs of *soupe aux pois* came from the kitchen behind the shop.

"Bon soir, messieurs!" said Noel, as he entered and looked about him.

From a bench behind the big box stove came a grunt, and there he saw the thin, small form of Mayor Octave Giroux. *Monsieur le maire* had little white whiskers in front of his ears on each side, and not enough chin to get in the way of his soup. His eyes were pale, with an expression which hinted that much shrewd planning was constantly going on behind them. He considered Noel very carefully.

There was no one else in the shop except old Xavier Thériault, a man of comfortable fatness, with a twinkle in his eye. The shopkeeper was a close friend of Father Larocque, and many owed him money in the village, so he had been able to play the friend to Noel Caron without drawing upon himself too much condemnation. He smiled now at his visitor.

"Good evening, my son! You have just come in from the bush?"

"Yes, it was a fine day to chop. I'd like a loaf of bread for my supper, Xavier, and half a pound of butter."

"Bon! You saw no wolves in the bush?"

"None on four legs," answered Caron lightly, with a smile at the remembrance of Adolphe Lucas.

"Ah!" breathed the mayor, with mean-

ing in a glance which he threw at Thériault.

Then, as if events were in a conspiracy against Noel, a sound came into the shop from somewhere far away in the descending night.

"Hark!" exclaimed Thériault, lifting his hand. "Listen to that!"

The sound came again after a moment, unmistakably a long and dismal wolf call.

"Do you hear, Caron?" asked Mayor Giroux.

"Certainly I hear," replied Noel, turning upon him. "The pack is gathering."

"You know their habits well!"

"Naturally—I am a woodsman."

"A strange woodsman! Never before have the wolves gathered like this!"

"It is cold and hunger, *monsieur le maire*," interposed old Xavier hastily. "It is but just to admit the state of the weather."

"Never before have we had anything that was not according to custom in St. Votique," the mayor went on, ignoring him. "The night is for sleep. A fiddle is for dancing—jigs, perhaps; and ordinary men stay out of the bush when wolves are so bold that they come into villages!"

"As for fiddling," said Noel, closer to anger than he had been in a long time, "it does not hurt any one. For the rest, speak to the wolves, not to me!"

"There are different kinds of fiddling," announced Mayor Giroux in an icy tone, "and it is said they have different effects. The little girl of Henri Patenaude is sick, and they do not know what is the matter with her!"

"*Ciel!*" cried Caron, forgetting his anger. "That is little Alma Rose! I have played for her many times!"

"That's it precisely!" remarked Giroux.

"*Quel malheur!*" exclaimed Thériault. "As if the loss of Patenaude's cow were not enough!"

"I must go to see the child," said Caron, as he put down money for his purchases, trying to pay no attention to the baleful old man behind the stove.

"Take my advice and stay away," said Giroux, determined to be unpleasant.

Noel turned sharply upon him.

"You mean, then, that I am not welcome here in St. Votique? If that is the case I will go!"

"*Dieu!*" cried Xavier. "You would not live to get to Pointe des Monts!"

"I am not sure that we want you to leave St. Votique," said the mayor. "The wolves—might be worse!"

Caron had been more and more surprised at this goading, at the rising menace in Mayor Giroux's conversation. Now all his light-heartedness changed to defiance. He gave a short laugh, full of bitterness, as he took up the package that Thériault gave him.

"Worse, *monsieur le maire*? You think I might run with the pack? Let me tell you that if I do, the first house we visit will be yours!" He turned at the door, on his way out. "Good night, Xavier!"

III

It was with slow and heavy feet that Noel Caron walked to the small house where he lived alone. He did not find it easy to go home like that, with the weight of his sinister reputation on his shoulders and a dark and empty house to greet him; but he found coals still glowing in the old-fashioned stove of two bridges, which he kept immaculate with silver-gilt paint—an enormous cast iron affair with the oven elevated above the griddles.

A lamp was company, set beside the fiddle case on the mantel. There was also the important ticking of the tall clock which had been brought up from the old parishes by his grandfather. It struck with the air of announcing an event.

Until the return of Susanne Gervais from the convent, his violin had been company enough for Noel when he was at home in the comfortable room where his people had lived before him. There were easy rocking chairs, and a small table with a cover of blue and white oilcloth. A crucifix hung upon one wall, a lithograph of Sir Wilfrid Laurier against another.

"I am lonesome," said Caron, in order to hear his own voice. "I must get a dog—if I stay in St. Votique!"

Noel did not have the roots of his heart in the soil, like a *habitant*. He was a *bûcheron*, a free woodsman, and his soul roved the mountain tops. Nevertheless he loved this home of his ancestors, and it is not good to be driven forth from one's own. In profound sadness he cooked and ate his supper.

When the dishes were washed and his pipe was going, he took down the violin—an aged instrument of good tone, and one that had known the touch of three gen-

erations of the family Caron. Noel laid his cheek against his old friend, and he drew the bow softly over the strings. It seemed to-night that the violin spoke as if it were living. It mourned with him, it crooned sympathy. The music became wife and dog and home.

The evening wore on. Noel played, and fell into meditation, and played again. The warning of Susanne, the feud with Lucas, the enmity of the mayor, all faded somewhat from their earlier importance. At no time had he been afraid, for he did not believe that the folly of St. Votique would lead it farther than superstition.

He decided to keep away from the house of Patenaude, because Henri worked for the mayor, and was a very ignorant man. Otherwise he would pay no attention to an affair that was plainly absurd. The people were frightened, that was all, and they would be until a break in the weather arrived. Then the wolves would scatter. In the meantime he would try, with the help of *le bon Dieu*, to find some way to the heart of Susanne Gervais.

The tall clock had struck twelve, and the hands were creeping on into the morning, when Caron, rousing himself to fill the stove with wood before he went to bed, heard the crunch of swift feet on the snow outside. He turned. A thud came, as of some one in great haste plunging against the door. Then Xavier Thériault was in the room, breathless, bringing a burst of cold air from the night and something of the terror that was upon St. Votique.

"You must hide!" he gasped. "They are coming for you!"

"What—what is it that you say?" stammered Noel, so taken by surprise that for a moment he could not even think.

"A mob!" panted Xavier, holding his fat stomach, which was little used to running. "Lucas and the mayor—Patenaude and twenty or thirty others! I heard about it, but I could scarcely believe until I saw them gathering at the house of the mayor by twos and threes! They are coming to see the color of blood from the *loup-garou!*"

It was true, then, this nightmare of which Susanne had been so much afraid! Noel's first feeling was one of misery that his own people could so turn upon him. Suddenly he felt a great sorrow for them.

"*Les pauvres!*" he exclaimed. "What madness!"

"They may be poor madmen, but you'll be a dead madman if you don't come with me—"

Thériault stopped abruptly and jerked himself around to face the door, which he had left swinging open. Caron's hand went to his knife. Other swift feet were coming.

It was Susanne Gervais who burst into the room. She banged the door shut and reeled against it, staring from Xavier to Noel with little red tuque askew and cheeks bright from running.

"You came to warn him?" she said to Thériault. "It was you I saw, then, ahead of me?"

"Yes, *mademoiselle*. I waited up to-night and watched the house of the mayor until I made sure that what I had heard was true. It is as Octave Giroux said—'When the moon is bright to-night, Caron will be hunted down like the wolf he is!' It is for the moon that they have delayed until midnight!"

"And you came to warn me, Susanne?" asked Noel, when he could get a chance to speak. He knew that she had come for that reason, and his heart sang at the knowledge, but he wanted to hear it from her.

"Yes," she replied. "Yes, Noel."

"Come!" interposed Xavier. "My house was built in the ancient times when there was fighting with the savages, and there is a cellar under the cellar. No one knows about it. I will put you there, and you will be safe!"

"I do not hide," Noel told him.

"*Dieu Seigneur!*" cried Thériault. "Do you know that they will kill you? The mayor says it is only to wound the *loup-garou*, so that the spell will be broken and the wolves will go from St. Votique; but am I a fool? Adolphe Lucas will see to it that they finish what they begin!"

A low cry broke from Susanne, and she grasped old Xavier's sleeve.

"Are you sure of that? Adolphe told me that it was only to drive Noel out of St. Votique!"

"Of course he would not tell you the truth, girl. Afterward he will say that Caron fought, and it was an accident."

"Ah, *Dieu!*" she moaned.

"That is clear," said Noel quietly. "I must go."

"You'll go to another world if you don't come with me!" exclaimed Xavier. "*Blasphème!* I have tried to spare you.

Noel—not yet have I told you the worst. This evening the red rash told them that the little one of Henri Patenaude, Alma Rose, has the smallpox. The scourge is upon us! Do you understand what that means, Caron? They think you have brought the curse of Heaven upon St. Votique because you are *loup-garou*. If there was a chance for you before, there is none now. Worse than all else, there is no saltpeter in the village. How can one cure smallpox without brandy and saltpeter? Brandy we have plenty, but there is not so much as a grain of saltpeter. We are helpless!"

IV

THE staccato sentences of Xavier Thériault revealed the doom of the parish. Half—nay, three-quarters of the people of St. Votique would die before the scourge had run its course. Without the one remedy upon which they depended, nothing could be done. There was no doctor. Fear would make them ready victims.

"Alma Rose will die!" whispered Caron, stricken by this latest blow.

"Noel Caron will die, if he does not go with me!" snapped Thériault.

"I go, good friend," said Noel slowly; "but not to your cellar, to hide. Am I a rabbit? I go to Pointe des Monts. The bush and the wolves will be kinder than St. Votique!"

"You may not be a rabbit, but you are certainly not a man of sense," replied Xavier. "*Sacré!* The wolves will pull you down before daylight! There is not another man in the village who would make that trip alone!"

To this Caron made no reply; and Susanne had not spoken since her realization of what the fate of Noel was to be if the mob found him. He had suddenly sprung into action. He wrapped his violin snugly in a pair of blankets, tying them with a long strip of rawhide, flung himself into a sheepskin jacket, and took down his little used rifle from its pegs behind the stove. A glance of farewell about the familiar room, and he was ready.

"Thank you!" he said to old Xavier, with a smile and a quick handclasp. "Let's march!"

Caron hardly dared to look at Susanne. He would say good-by to her at the last moment, when he left her on the highway. She was at his side as they went out into

the bright night, into air so cold that the first intake of breath smarted nose and throat. Through the stillness came the crunch and shuffle of many feet, the blurred sound of voices.

"It is the will of *le bon Dieu!*" muttered Thériault. "Good luck, my son!"

He was gone, melting into the shadows with a wheeze, and Susanne and Noel were running lightly down the street.

"You'll get into the bush quickest if you go past my house," said Susanne. "The forest comes nearest on that side of the village."

Caron had snatched up his snowshoes, and he held them close, so that they would not clatter. Once they were on his feet, outside St. Votique, he would feel safe; and he had something to take with him as he marched alone under the moon, through the silent, shadow-haunted forest. Susanne had cared enough to warn him!

They ran on past dark houses, with the sound of the mob growing fainter. Only when they found Caron's house empty would the hunters be in full cry.

Before the home of Suzanne Gervais Noel slackened speed. He would give himself a moment of farewell with her, no matter what it cost in time; but to his astonishment she caught up her snowshoes from beside the doorway and ran on down the street with hardly a break.

"Susanne!" he cried. "Where are you going?"

She ran the faster at the sound of his voice. Then he tried to catch her, but his hesitation had given her too much of a start. She had laced on her snowshoes at the end of the street, where the snow-covered fields began, before he caught up with her.

"Hurry, Noel!" she exclaimed. "Some one may have heard you call to me!"

"What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"I'm going into the bush!"

Before he could put out a hand to stop her, she had started away over the soft snow, where he could not follow until the *raquettes* were under his feet.

Caron gained on her steadily as she mounted toward the dark woods; but she was putting forth a great effort, and he did not come abreast of her until they were among the first scattering trees. Together, moved by the same impulse, they turned and looked back toward St. Votique. Here

and there a light gleamed, but there was no clamor of pursuit across the white fields.

"They're still hunting for you," murmured Susanne; "but they won't dare to follow, if they find the trail."

"Not to-night," said Noel grimly. "Are you content with that? Will you go home now?"

"No!" she cried, moving away so that he could not reach her. "I am going to Pointe des Monts to-night."

Caron drew a deep breath. A violin, a wolf, he could understand somewhat; but women, and especially this one, were like the strange and beautiful country above the rivers. Men loved that immense country of the snows, but there was no man who knew all about it.

"To go is to risk death, Susanne!"

"*Le bon Dieu* can take care of two as well as one!"

"Susanne, why do you want to go?"

"To get away from Adolphe Lucas, for one thing. For the rest—I don't know all the reasons why I am going."

"*Allons!*" Noel exclaimed suddenly. "I can say nothing more!"

He shifted the roll of blankets a little higher on his shoulders and struck out. Susanne fell into step beside him, dropping back a little now and then when brush hindered them.

They went on with a steady, swinging stride, and Caron found that the girl could keep pace with him, at least for the present. No mob from St. Votique could catch them before dawn—he felt sure of that; but a fast traveler alone might be able to do it.

As for the wolves—Caron wondered. The pack had gathered about the village early in the evening. It might be raiding some barn now, or swinging around in a circle which would cross his own trail, or it might be miles away in the mountains.

"Will the wolves attack you, Noel?" asked Susanne abruptly, as if she had read his thought.

"I don't know," he said. "They never have."

"I thought you said this morning—"

"I said that once or twice the wolves thought I would make a good dinner. They came close, for a time; but they did not try to eat me."

"Oh!" she exclaimed uncertainly, and after that neither of them spoke for a long time.

The only sounds that went with them were the swishing of snowshoes and an occasional faint clatter as rim touched rim. The night was one of intense cold, but it was not of that deadly temperature in which men do not travel on account of the lungs, which freeze and cause death. Caron knew that it was not cold to that point by the taste of the air in his mouth. Susanne and he moved swiftly, and their tuques were pulled down, so that only their faces were exposed to the night; but he watched, nevertheless, for frostbite. It would go hard with a man not able to march, unless he had a fire. Dawn was not too far off, and Noel was glad that this journey had commenced well after midnight.

It was his quick ear which caught, despite the knitted wool that covered it, the sound of danger from behind. It was such a sound as would be made by the breaking of a dry branch when man or beast brushed against it.

Caron spun around with a skillful turn of his snowshoes. He flipped off a mitten, so that a finger would be free for the trigger of his rifle, and peered through the moonlight.

V

It was well that Noel had turned. Just coming into view from the shadows, and equally ready with his rifle, was Adolphe Lucas. There could be no mistaking the outline of that burly figure, the set of the big head upon the broad shoulders.

A stifled cry came from Susanne. Lucas halted. Susanne and Noel had just crossed a little natural clearing, and between the two men, as they stood there, lay a white expanse, unbroken. As the trees here were beeches and oaks, bare of foliage, the moonlight flooded the open space.

Caron noted Adolphe's readiness to shoot and measured the distance between himself and his enemy. As the two men stood silent, in that moment of meeting and of calculation, a warning came to them from the mountains. A long cry, weighted with dread promise and with the savagery of the hunt, rose upon the night. A wolf had given the call to kill.

Noel felt Susanne shrink against him. Then the voice of Adolphe came, trembling with the pressure of rage behind it:

"I am going to kill you!"

"That is as it may be," replied Noel, without heat; "but for the sake of Susanne

let us try to kill each other with knives! In that way one will live to take care of her, if possible. If we fire, we shall both be hit, and the wolves will get her. Are you of an intelligence to understand that, my friend?"

"I will do that," Lucas replied thickly. "Take his rifle, Susanne, before I put mine down. I don't trust him!"

"And she will keep it pointed at you, to make sure that you are to be trusted," said Caron, as he handed her the gun.

He felt the girl's hands tremble, but she threw the weapon up under her arm with the muzzle trained on Adolphe; and Noel drew his knife as he saw Lucas lay his rifle along a low-growing limb.

A wolf howled in answer to the call that had gone out a moment before. Then faintly came another response, from a distance. They would gather here soon. Lucas advanced, knife in hand, and Noel smiled to himself at the folly of fighting with death drawing in about them. One or all of them might feed the pack to-night.

Susanne gave a little moan.

"Adolphel!" she cried. "I came because I wanted to! I—"

"I am going to kill Caron!" growled Lucas. "Without him to lead them, the wolves can be driven off!"

Now into the heart of Noel came a certain admiration for the courage of Adolphe Lucas. He believed, this ignorant one, that he was fighting a man of devilish powers, a man capable of drawing dozens and scores of the gray beasts from the slopes of the forest; yet he did not hesitate. Moreover, he had come alone from the safety of St. Votique.

"Adolphe," said Noel, "this fight is not of my seeking!"

Without a word in reply, Lucas came steadily on. There was confidence in the poise of his body, in the way he held his knife. They were both on snowshoes now, and the footing was equal.

Caron took a step forward, with apparent carelessness, and drew Lucas into a lunge. This was what he wanted. With quickness that would have done credit to a cat, he moved his body to one side. Then, as Adolphe recovered, he drove his knife point down upon his antagonist's right hand with the force of a hammer blow.

Against bone and knife handle Noel's blade snapped, but the work had been done. Lucas's knife dropped to the snow

and buried itself. He staggered, righted himself with a groan, and began to run toward his rifle.

Instantly Noel was behind his treacherous foe. He jumped upon the tail of a snowshoe and flung Adolphe sprawling. Then it was easy to strip the *raquettes* from his feet and leave him helpless and wallowing, chest deep.

Noel backed away, and for the first time since the beginning of the attack let his gaze swing from his enemy. He saw two balls of opalescent fire at the edge of the woods. Susanne? Fear touched him until he realized that she was standing within arm's length, holding his rifle ready to fire. Her gaze, too, was fastened upon the shadowy ring of trees that encircled them. Other pairs of burning eyes were there—half a dozen, a dozen, Noel could not count them. He knew what this must mean to Susanne, who probably had never seen the eyes of a wild beast at night, and yet she stood there steadily and waited for him to act.

Noel was struggling foot by foot toward the tree where his rifle rested. He could not help but see the eyes, and he must know that the wolves had caught the scent of that bleeding hand. Could the hand be used to hold a rifle? Did Adolphe want the weapon for Caron, or for the wolves? At best, the two of them could not stand off the beasts if they made a determined rush.

For a few terrible seconds Noel was bewildered. He could think of nothing but to stand in front of Susanne and shoot while there was a cartridge left, and then to swing his empty rifle until he went down under the gray bodies. Then his thought flashed to the companion that had been his comfort and his counselor in time of stress; for the violin was with him, riding upon his shoulders.

With desperate haste Noel flung down the blanket roll. If these wolves would listen as other creatures of the bush had listened to him, sitting with ears cocked and eyes intent upon the source of the pleasant sounds, then he could hold back death for a time, at least.

The violin was clear of its case; his mittens were hurled aside. His fingers touched the strings, and he drew the bow gently across them.

At that first strain of music Susanne lifted her head and Lucas ceased to struggle

through the snow. This much Noel saw as he began to play. He could also see that the eyes of the wolves drew no nearer.

In the beginning Caron played to them the old *chansons* of Canada—"En Roullant Ma Boule," "Isabeau s'y Promène," "Gai Lon Là, Gai le Rosier," and all the rest that he could remember. From "A la Claire Fontaine," the *chanson* close to the heart of every true *Canadien*, he drifted into the improvisations with which he had filled many long hours by his stove. He played the serenades to the glory of the moonlight that had been so suspected by the mayor of St. Votique.

Noel remembered the music that had one day held a very wise old fox motionless for a long time, while he and the fox looked at each other across forty yards of yellow and crimson autumn forest. This he sent forth upon the frozen night. He talked to the wolves. He drew from his violin the yearning and the sadness of their own long call, the mourning of their cry across the bush by night. He touched that cry with moonlight and softened it with the ripple of waters.

At length, of necessity, he had to stop. He ripped open jacket and heavy shirts, and thrust a stiffening hand under his arm-pit, so that the warm flesh of his body would bring life back into it. The other hand, quickly! Then, as the watching eyes began to shift restlessly toward him, his bow found the strings again, and again the night was rich with music.

How long he played, and warmed his fingers, and played again, he did not know; but at last he began to freeze. The cold, having entrance to his clothing, wrapped itself about him. The end of this embrace was certain, but he dared not stop playing. How long could he endure?

When it seemed to him that his spirit was drifting from his body, when the hand upon the moving bow and the fingers upon the strings had become alien to him, the end arrived so swiftly that he found still a little more strength.

A grayness filtered through the moonlight, and the stretch of sky that Noel could see by lifting his eyes took on a different tone. The wings of dawn were spreading over the cold world. With set teeth Caron bent all the force of his will against his failing body.

Dawn! He played the triumph of the brightness that would so soon stream up

the heavens. His violin sang the beauty of those early tints of rose and lavender. It heralded the majesty of the rising sun, the joy and glory of returning day.

When Noel lowered his eyes from the pageant of the morning, the circle of watching eyes had vanished. Light was spreading among the trees. A last gray form moved away like a fading shadow.

The violin dropped from Caron's hands. He wrapped his arms against his chest and shivered, hollow-eyed, swaying. There was Susanne, coming swiftly toward him with hands extended and an inarticulate cry in her throat. Adolphe Lucas was a black mound against the snow.

"Fire!" croaked Noel. "Make a fire, Susanne!"

VI

AN hour later, when the three were warmed again and Adolphe's wounded hand had been bound up, Noel thoughtfully wrapped his violin in the blankets and slung the roll over his shoulder. Through the time of suffering, while they thawed and gathered dry branches for the fire, they had said little to one another. Now Noel rose and took his rifle.

"Susanne," he said, "do you want to go back to St. Votique with Adolphe, or will you come with me?"

"I am going on to Pointe des Monts, myself," said Lucas. He sat with bowed head, helpless to do harm now that he had neither rifle nor knife, and had a wound to nurse. "They have smallpox in St. Votique."

"I knew that," remarked Susanne thoughtfully. Suddenly she smiled. "I am going to finish the journey with you, Noel. Afterward I shall go back as soon as I can. They will have need of me."

"Then you can go back with me," Noel told her, "and it will be very soon."

"You?" she cried. "You are going back to St. Votique?"

"At once. There is the saltpeter to be taken to them. Little Alma Rose is not going to die if my legs can save her!"

"I was going to take it to them, even if I could get no one to go with me," Susanne told him. "That is one of the reasons why I came with you."

"Alone, through the bush!" muttered Noel, with pride in her courage, as if it had been his own. "And so that was why you came?"

Her eyes grew like forest pools when sunlight strikes into their depths.

"It was not the only reason. I did not want to say farewell, Noel!"

"Not even to the *loup-garou*, Susanne?"

"I know now that I did not want to say farewell," she repeated. "No, not even to the *loup-garou!*"

Their hands met. It did not matter that they were padded with heavy mittens.

What the eyes of Susanne and Noel said was more than the twining of fingers or the meeting of lips. Noel Caron knew that he was no longer alien to his own.

Slowly the bowed head of Adolphe Lucas lifted.

"I was going to stay in Pointe des Monts on account of the scourge," he said; "but I will go back with you to St. Votique. They are my people, too!"

Aces High

THE PLAIN TALE OF AN AMBITIOUS YOUNG AIRMAN WHOM THE LUCK OF WARTIME COMPELLED TO FLY A LUMBERING OLD BOMBING BUS

By Lawrence MacLawrence

HERE'S the picture—a flying field at dusk; a crowd of officers and, a little apart, a crowd of men, both staring anxiously off into the sky. At last there is a pointing finger from one of the crowds, and the cry is taken up by both:

"There he comes!"

A tiny speck appears, growing larger and larger, changing from a speck to a dot, from a dot to a thin line, from a thin line to a miniature of fine wire and fragile fabric, which in turn becomes a plane in full flight. The plane circles the field, at last tipping up on one wing and slipping softly almost to the feet of the officers. A laughing face appears over the cowl of the narrow cockpit, a man clammers out and gazes at the bullet-scarred wings.

"How many to-day?" one of the be-medaled group that surrounds him asks in a tone of awe.

The flyer flirts his gauntleted hand disdainfully.

"Only three. It's getting hard to find a fight these days. I wanted to make it five more before I went to Paris."

The ace has come home from another day of good hunting!

Now for the reality, as Quarles was experiencing it for himself. He was just one

of twenty weary workingmen coming home through a peaceful countryside. To be sure, these particular workingmen were grouped two by two in a formation of D. H. 4's winging back to their hangars after the usual afternoon bomb raid; but they might as well have been twenty weary workingmen in a bevy of Fords coming home after installing some prosaic steam pipes.

Work of this sort had been the monotonous portion of the squadron ever since Quarles, first lieutenant, Air Service, U. S. A., had joined it for final polishing after his training in England. That was another cause of discontent. Here he was a lone Yank in a squadron of Britishers on the north front, with only allies around him when he wanted friends. A lot he was doing to win the war! He jerked the stick angrily to correct for a bump.

Of course there were some little black puffballs from an Archie hanging lazily in the air toward the end of the flight a mile or so behind. One gets used to Archies, just as one gets used to punctures in tires; and at twelve thousand feet an Archie isn't nearly as tiresome as a tack in the left front on the ground. It was true, too, that the country beneath only appeared at peace, seen through the merciful transfigu-

ration of mist and twilight which hid the terrible things war had done to the earth and to man's works upon it.

They were getting on toward home now, for almost directly under him was the abandoned German aérodrome at Foucaucourt, just north of the white line of road which, stretching eastward from Amiens far into the enemy's territory, often guided them out and pointed them back. To Quarles's right, farther northward, wound the Somme, a dim silver shimmer. He knew every one of its aimless meanderings as well as he knew the stores on Main Street at home. So this was war!

All at once the stick between his legs began banging under his hand, and Quarles came back to things aerial with a start. MacLeod, his observer, failing to get his pilot's attention by other means from the back seat, was wiggling his emergency dual control. Instinctively Quarles banked to the left, to meet the abrupt swing in that direction that had been made by the flight commander, flying just in front.

Peering about to see what this sudden veer might portend, Quarles saw that the last plane on the left of their long flight had been attacked by two enemy Albatross scouts, which had dropped on it from out the blue. He could see the dart and sparkle of the tracer, and the glint of red on the bellies of the two German planes as they maneuvered swiftly for a kill. Caught napping, the slower two-seater lurched, twisted, and fell, trailing a tail of smoke that reddened to flame as the plane swept from sight. One enemy followed it down with a final sputter of machine gun, before darting off with his companion into the gathering twilight.

With a half formed thought of trying for revenge in his mind, Quarles banked roughly to the left again, even though he knew how futile his move was. He saw that the leader was wagging his wings for him to get back into formation, and reluctantly he speeded up to regain his place. A fine, sporting war, not even trying to help a comrade! Scott and Bass gone west, poor chaps!

Back at the aérodrome at last, Quarles sat sullenly in his seat and watched over his shoulder as Mac clambered down out of his cockpit, and, pulling off his goggles, looked at the pilot quizzically.

"Pardon, old turnip, for wakin' you up an' all that," he said; "but not fancyin'

a long sleep meself, I took the liberty. It must be a gran' thing, now, to be one of Pershing's young crusaders with a holy desire to die for the cause, eh?"

Quarles climbed out himself, stiff-legged after his hours in the narrow seat, and busied himself with the buckle on his collar, saying nothing. How he hated that "young crusader" talk, and the misguided stay-at-home who had invented it!

"There you were," went on Mac, "ready to barge off on some private *strafe* of your own, an' five Huns sittin' up there aloft, hankerin' for cold meat for tea! Well, don't be put out about it. It's the first thing of the kind that we've had since you've been flyin' with us, an' wisdom comes with age in this war—if you live to get it," he added with a chuckle.

Still in a moody silence, Quarles followed Mac to their quarters. They shared the same tent, these two, each of whom depended for his life on the alertness and skill of the other; and Quarles had become strangely fond of the shaggy, humorous Scot. After all, friendships had to ripen quickly in France in those days, if they were to ripen at all; and these two had worked and played inseparably together almost since their first meeting.

Once in the tent, still in a sulky silence, Quarles began wriggling out of his heavy flying suit. He broke out all at once.

"Here I'm flying these lumbering old bombing busses, and all the crowd I trained with are having a glorious time flying scouts and bagging a Hun once in a while!"

Mac shot a quick glance at his companion. The state of his pilot's mind was of intimate concern to him, since on it depended so completely the state of his own body; and Mac, with true Scottish thrift, wanted to give no greater odds than were already against him. If this outbreak of his friend was merely a result of the frazzled nerves that come to those who have been long hours under war tension at high altitudes, the mood would soon pass. If it were something else, that was of more serious concern. He went on with his dressing.

Quarles stuck peevishly to his original plaint.

"Here I am, stranded, with no chance of doing anything real. I hear they've formed two American squadrons on this front, and one of 'em's got a mess sergeant, too, that used to be a bartender!"

Mac smacked his lips, and plunged avidly into what might be a diversion.

"Make a note of that. There's something that 'll bear lookin' into the next rainy day. I've a fancy for American cocktails. They're no so sparin' of the liquor in 'em. While we're waitin', get into your clothes an' let's tootle over to the mess. I've a thirst!"

But Quarles refused to be diverted.

"What are we doing here, anyway?" he went on stubbornly. "We cruise out with a load of eggs, and we don't see where we drop 'em, or else we bat around taking pictures of a lot of bally trenches and woods and things for the staff to play war with. How are we helping to win the war? Tell me that!"

Mac shook his head sadly.

"As to that, me brave crusadin' friend, I can't answer, because I've never thought about it; but if it's the conduc' of the war that's botherin' you, I'm not the man to deny that the general staff has been mis-handlin' it shameful. To change to a more burnin' subject—where are we going to disport ourselves to-night? I'd a mind we might try Annabelle's, an' sort of cement our relations with our noble allies an' a' that."

"Damn Annabelle!" said Quarles. "Her finger nails are in mourning for the whole French army, and those woolen stockings and wooden shoes—"

Mac sighed sadly.

"'Tis true what you say. I've been so long away from the fleshpots that woolen looks like silk to me; but to talk of finger nails—man, you've taken all the romance out of life!"

He ducked a shoe thrown at him and scuttled up the steps. Quarles could hear him chuckle as he limped away toward the mess on the game foot that had dropped him out of the infantry.

II

LEFT alone, Quarles resumed his moody abstraction. Mac had put the words into his mouth. Romance had gone out of the world, and the war, into which he had plunged as the one big chance of his lifetime, was just another disappointment. Before the magic of April, 1917, that was to metamorphose so many things, there had stretched ahead of Quarles a future as carefully laid out for him as a valet lays out clothes on a bed. In the fullness of

time he would inherit his father's modest business and go on taking endless pictures of Hobbs's new fall window display, the annual dinner of the Knights of the East, and other equally thrilling subjects.

"Quarles & Son, Commercial Photographers," had often seemed to him less an advertisement than an epitaph. In time, too, he would marry Mary Jones, as every one, including Mary herself, fully expected him to do, and would settle down to a humdrum and wholly respectable life.

It was not at all that Mary was not a highly satisfying and desirable little person, but he resented the infernal cut-and-driedness of it all. He wanted to have first his "crowded hour of glorious life"—a quotation of which he had been very fond in a sophomoric way. He had inscribed it on the picture of himself in uniform that he had left with Mary, and she had cried, and all in all they had had a teary and sentimental leave-taking.

Looking back at it now in the light of sound reason, Quarles had to admit to himself that he had not missed Mary so very much, for there had been so many other things to think about in his crowded hours of ground school, and the even more crowded ones that had succeeded. He had left with her a clear description of what his life at the front would be like, gathered mostly from lurid and highly imaginative stories picked up from magazines and newspapers. He could think of her this very minute as shivering for him on a lone patrol, or crying over her fancy of him lying, a battered body, under a bloody tangle of struts and fabric somewhere out in the mud of No Man's Land. What a chance! Quarles kicked viciously at the edge of a duckboard.

But then the war had brought some romance at that, he thought, though he felt guilty to think of such things in the same breath, as it were, with Mary. There was that Australian nurse at the base in Étaples. Other things than friendship had a way of ripening quickly in the summer of 1918. He had seen a good deal of her in the week he spent there before assignment to a squadron. They used to smoke cigarettes together behind a dune on the beach, while the white fingers of the searchlights probed back and forth in the sky.

One night when they were sitting there, snuggled up on his trench coat, the barking of the anti-aircraft guns and the quickened,

nervous flutter of the lights had warned them that something more than soft moonlight was abroad in the sky. There had been none of that droning, intermittent hum, as of a million bumble bees, that he had come to know since then, for the raiders had slid down the air silently, dropped their deadly cargo, and flitted away amid a burst of futile shell fire. She and he had sat very close, throwing a shadow as of one person on the moonlit sand during the moments the raid had lasted; but those moments had spanned years, and her eyes had been gently luminous as she leaned against him and looked up into his face.

"You flyers are so-o-o-o brave!" she had told him.

Life with her, he was sure, could never be cut and dried. To be truthful with himself, Quarles had to admit now that he had been rather green not to have sought a dugout at the first flurry; but she had called him brave, and here he was flying lumbering old bombing busses as unromantically as a grocery wagon delivering vegetables!

Quarles buttoned his blouse and stalked over to the mess. Its one long room was full of smoke, and resounded to the laughter and the shouting always attendant on cocktail hour. The little cubbyhole of a bar at the far end had a crowd banked three deep, and the piano was banging noisily in competition with the hoarse cacophony of the graphophone.

"Hy, Yank! Just in time for a spot. Come on!" Cunningham, a pilot of B flight, and Piggy West, just returned from leave, seized him on either side and elbowed toward the bar.

"Here, sergeant! Three Scotch and soda—or do you want vermouth? Make it three vermouth, then. Verringer, you great ox, let a fellow in, will you?"

The flight captain grinned amiably and took himself and his glass through the tumult to where the major was talking to the adjutant at the head table. Scraps of conversation came to Quarles as he sipped his drink:

"And when she asked him for a fiver, Piggy couldn't think what she meant. He thought she was a curate's daughter off on a spree."

There was a gale of laughter.

"It was a Halberstadt, I tell you!"

"Go on, the Halberstadt was washed out long ago. How did you know?"

"By the shape, you ass! I'll leave it to the major. Sir, isn't the Halberstadt a good deal like our Bristol Fighter?"

"And all the time Ronnie never knew that she was running around with the town major between whiles."

"Come on, Yank! Down that and have another."

"Hello, Yank! I nearly crawled on your tail this afternoon while you were banging around in a circle. Let's all have one. No, let me have the chit!"

"Cheerio, then!"

It was a fine crowd, Quarles thought, feeling the tingle of his second vermouth in his toes—good lads every one. They trooped off to the mess table like a crowd of schoolboys on a holiday. Indeed, they were little more than that, from Hunt, the new pilot in C Flight, pink-cheeked and looking like a misplaced cherub, to Captain Green of B Flight, who was an aged warrior of twenty-six.

There was a voice from one end of the table.

"Say, who's been over to Twenty-Two lately? Crosby, the old blighter, owes me a hundred francs on that last poker."

There was a moment's silence, then some one answered: " Didn't you hear? Crosby went out day before yesterday. He went down on an L. V. G., taking pictures or something on his own, and three Albatrosses got him. Jolly poor judgment to go diving around without taking a looksee! Our Archie put up a burst near him to warn him, but he was set on the Hun and didn't notice. He got the two-seater and one of the Huns, though, so it's not too bad."

"Sorry," said the first speaker. "Crosby was a good egg."

"Hey, Mac!" cried a voice. "Who's the bit of fluff in the wind? You're wearin' the kilts to-night."

Mac smoothed his kilts over his hairy knees complacently.

"Your skill at obsairvin' is havin' a much needed improvement, Hoddy, me boy. It's true that the kilties are me regular callin' garment. No woman can withstan' 'em. Why? I'm no sayin' exactly. Belike it's curiosity that makes 'em follow a kilt."

There followed laughter and the banging of spoons on the table around him, and from the head table the major smiled cheerfully down through the smoke. Good

boys! They were ragging one another, which was a good sign. When they stopped ragging—well, time enough to worry about that when it happened.

Mac went on as soon as he could make himself heard.

"Me Yankee friend an' me are steppin' out to-night for some of the simple pleasures aboot the countryside. We may let you pick us up with the tender when you come back from Amiens, if there's one of you still able to recognize a friend."

"By the way"—the major's cool tones came down from the end of the room, and there was silence to hear him—"who's in charge of the tender to-night? You, Barnes? Well, see to it that you have the lights out coming back. Wing's been complaining, and from now on all cars will run dark on the roads. You, Chester and Hathaway, don't forget you're taking the dawn patrol, and for the rest there's an early raid—all planes to leave the ground at six."

He rose, and the mess broke up into groups to go about their various diversions.

Quarles blew a long, soft whistle as he and Mac walked out into the twilight.

"So it's all lights out even back here, is it? It looks as if there was something afoot, doesn't it?"

"I'm tellin' you, lad—if I know the signs, there's a big *strafe* comin' somewhere here or hereabout, an' Fritz has the proper wind up. Your noble aspeerations for glory an' all the rest of it are like to be met; but look who's come among us!" He broke off to give a shout of greeting. "Some of Seventy-Two come over to drink up our Scotch, an' there's Dozey himself. Hi, Dozey, where were you this afternoon, you blitherin' blighter, wi' the whole Hun circus on top of us?"

Captain Claxton waved a friendly hand at Mac.

"No end of sorry, old bean, but there was another flock of them to the north of you, and when we put out after them the others came down from somewhere and jumped you. We chased them home, but couldn't get a one. Better luck next time, what?"

He stamped off into the mess with his thirsty companions.

"There you are!" said Quarles bitterly, as he and Mac turned into the road that led away from the drome. "Look at him! He has something to be cheerful about,

with his twelve Huns already, and more to look forward to!"

He swung viciously at the hedge row beside him with his stick.

"Aye, look at him," answered Mac; "an' to-day he an' that bunch o' glory chasers with him were out after medals when they should have been shepherdin' us home."

"There it is—shepherding us home, as if we were a lot of sheep, and about as useful!"

Mac laid his hand on his friend's arm.

"Laddie, I'm no good findin' words for things. I'm better at machine gunnin'—a machine gun bein' a thing I can un'erstan'. I'm not sayin' a word against the lads that fly the scouts; but this war has a lot o' various an' sundry jobs in it. It's not flashin' off on your own that's goin' to win, but each carryin' on wi' what he's put to do. Dozey's job is there an' ours is here. There's no such a difference between 'em, after all."

"But bombing," Quarles went on, "and taking pictures that don't amount to shucks, as far as I can see! A nice thing to go home and say that's all I've done! Why, I could have stayed home and mucked around with that."

Mac sighed.

"I'm not sayin' you might not. Laddie, your trouble is that you're thinkin' this is a wee private war got up for your own amusement. I'm no preachin', an' sometimes I wonder what it's all about; but I'm here to carry on, an' so are you, an' we'll both do just that. Just now let's be thinkin' o' the pleasures o' the evenin' that's before us. Think o' that peach brandy that's waitin'! Step out for the lights o' Lunnon! It's no such a bad war, after all."

III

DARKNESS comes late on a summer evening in northern France, and the daylight was still lingering as they followed the brown road between the high hedges on either side. Ahead of them, but far off, mere specks against the light blue of the evening horizon, three planes were dipping down to a belated home-coming. The air was still, and only the silvery tinkle of a bell on some invisible goat or cow, going placidly about its roadside grazing, came to break the hush.

Yet behind the next wood, Quarles knew,

tons of powerful explosives lay hidden in their pits; and across the gently rolling country seen through a break in the hedge, those faint and almost indistinguishable brown smudges were not peaceful haystacks, but the cocoons from which there would shortly hatch a stinging brood of night flyers to harry the Germans. War was above, about, and around them everywhere.

The strum of a motor rapidly approaching behind them came to their ears, accompanied by a confused sound that was neither roaring nor singing, though it partook of the noisiest elements of both. There was a shout of greeting as the tender from their squadron, bearing its nightly load of pleasure seekers for Amiens, overtook them and drew up to a jerky halt. From it, amid a chorus of jeers and cat calls, two of their comrades were bundled out, and the tender sped on its way, the raucous clamor of its passengers diminishing rapidly in the distance.

"Come on!" cried Mac, quickening his limp. "Here's Piggy an' Danger, that wild Africander, decided to try our simple country pastimes. So you've forswore the temptations of Amiens to-night? Man, you'll never live to regret it! They've a brandy that'll fair put your eye out. One drink, an' you're slidin' down the air wi' your controls jammed an' never a thought for the crash. Step out! We've wasted too much time philosophizin'."

The *estaminet* for which they were bound was known to only a few choice spirits of the squadron. Indeed, the wilder element would never have noticed it at all, for it lacked the rag, tag, and bobtail of the more crowded cafés in the city, where there was always a chance for a glorious riot, and where there were more bright eyes to cheer tired fighting men. Nevertheless, the chosen few found this roadside inn ideal for a convivial evening, made pleasanter by the demure witchery of Annabelle and her sister Anais, who, with all their menfolk but an old grandfather away at the war, dispensed bottled sunshine and warm smiles to all comers. They had counted many a franc into the cracked china jug in the old kitchen cupboard since these strange youths of another land, with their light-hearted laughter and their incomprehensible songs, and with the silver wings on their breasts, had been stationed over the hill.

Mac was a prime favorite with them. He flung open the door with a shout.

"Cheerio, Anais! Give us a kiss, lass! No? Annabelle, then."

He danced off after her, cornering her at last by the fireplace, where ensued sundry slappings and squealings, from which Mac returned smacking his lips.

"Man, it makes the drink more tasty! *Allez*, Anais! Trot out the bottle, an' you'd best bring another for luck. Hi, Piggy, you connivin' scoundrel, not you! Come back here!"

But Piggy and Annais had disappeared cellarward. Meanwhile Annabelle busied herself setting out the glasses, and the grandfather, a feeble old man, stood bobbing and grinning in his corner. The last faint light of evening fell through the open door and struck a spark from the glassware on the high cupboard, behind which the smoke-stained beams faded off into the dusk of the corners.

The smiling Annabelle tucked up a straying lock of hair and straightened her dress, womanlike. Mac, in kilts and Glengarry, leaned on his stick in the middle of the room, embracing every one and everything in the broad expanse of his homely grin. All these things were etched on the imperishable metal of Quarles's memory.

Now there were audible faint scufflings and squeakings from below, and at last the welcome clink of full bottles, as a flushed and somewhat tousled Anais emerged from the cellar, followed by Piggy. Mac pounded on the table with his stick.

"Hurry there an' fill 'em up! Cheerio, old un!"—to the grandfather. "Give him a glass, Annabelle. Here's how, you bloom-in' Yank—down it is!"

"Here's to ye, Mac!"

"Man, did I not say 'twas a drink for proper fightin' men? *Comprenez*, Annabelle? Well, *comprenez* this, then. It can be done in gestures." He pulled Annabelle down on the seat beside him and settled her comfortably against a broad chest. "Voilà! Now all you have to do is to keep 'em comin'. I'm in wonderful form to-night. I'm like to give you 'Loch Lomond' before the battle's over."

The ancient grandfather watched with his bright eyes from his corner. Yes, a little love was not amiss for soldiers—and then it helped to bring in the francs. Anais went to the cupboard for candles, and when

she came back she shut in their fresh, clear singing.

It was later, much later, that Mac did his famous Highland fling, while Piggy accompanied him with a frightful caterwauling meant to parody the bagpipes. Quarles was vowing eternal constancy to both the sisters, at which Danger waxed highly wroth; but Anais whispered soothing words into his ear, and kissed him on the tip of his nose.

So at last they came out into the night, to walk up to the main road, where they might be picked up by the tender returning from Amiens. They heard it long before it came up to them in the moonlight.

"Hey, Mac, you should have been with us!" some one shouted. "Rudge is blotto. Shove him off the seat, somebody, and make room. There was a riot in the Hôtel Occidental, and Hunt got a brass hat from some staff blighter. Show it to him, cherub!"

As they took their lyric way back to the drome, Mac's powerful voice drowned out "Cock Robin" and a medley of more Rabelaisian airs:

"You tak' the high road,
An' I'll tak' the low road—"

straight through to an inexpressibly mournful "Loch Lo-o-o-mond," drawn out like the wail of the pibroch itself.

"Man," he groaned, resting his head on Quarles's shoulder, "have ye no sentiment in your cold Puritan heart? Can ye not wax sentimental about one of your American lakes—Erie, for instance?"

IV

STRANGELY enough, next morning Quarles's black mood had vanished, and he awoke wholly satisfied with the war in general, and even with his own particular share in it. He went out to his plane with a high heart and a cheerful mind. Mac, pulling on his gloves, halted to chuckle.

"For a man wi' no stomach for woolen stockin's an' wooden shoes, you were goin' it strong last night," he said. "Go on, laddie, an' use all six of your eyes to-day. I misdoubt but we'll hear somethin' from our friends."

The planes were out in front of the hangars, props turning idly after the preliminary tuning up. Mechanics trudged stolidly here and there about their tasks of grooming the big ships. Some, with the

chocks pulled from under the wheels, waddled out upon the drome for all the world like awkward ducks, rocking from side to side with tails dragging; while from others came the tearing hum of motors full on, throwing dust and gravel along the ground and vibrating the thin fabric on the sides of the fuselage.

Quarles tested his engine and nodded to the mechanics, who jerked the blocks from the wheels, and with stick well back he gave the motor more throttle to taxi slowly out upon the field, where he took his regular place as second from the right of the flight. Just ahead of him Verringer was standing up in his cockpit to see that all was ready. He bobbed down again, and Quarles subconsciously ran a hand over the catch to his belt. All secure!

He saw Verringer wave his gauntleted hand, saw his plane jolt forward a few feet jerkily. Then, with the rich, full roar of the motor, the tail lifted, and, with all the awkwardness gone, the plane ran swiftly along the ground.

It was Quarles's turn now, and he gave his engine the gun, pushing his stick forward a little to raise the tail. There came the full blast of air from the motor, shaking the wings and strumming the framework around him. There followed the usual flash of the earth beneath him, a succession of gentle bounces at longer and longer intervals, and then, all at once, that inexpressible feeling of lightness as he took the air.

He held the stick forward for a moment to gather speed, then pulled it back and banked gently to the right, to follow the flight commander. Out of the tail of his eye, on his left, he saw Danger and Curtin flying on a level with him across the narrow wedge of the formation.

Heavy and trundling as the D. H. 4's might seem upon the ground, once in their natural element they took on a grace and rhythm that each time was a new beauty to Quarles. He turned slightly, to look behind him. There was the little green handkerchief of the field already far off beneath him, with the black dots which were the ground force going back to their jobs around the hangars. Behind him, strung out for nearly a mile, was the flight, seeming rather to float than to fly, rising and falling gently on the air currents.

The soothing absence of any effect of motion in straight flying at an altitude is

almost soporific, and Quarles shook himself in his straps as they reached the ten-thousand-foot mark over the broken country that marked the trenches around Villers-Bretonneux. Away off to the south, toward Moreuil, there was much smoke hanging in the morning air. Perhaps the French were putting on some kind of a show down there, but otherwise the lines seemed quiet. To the north, and at a little higher level, he saw a cloud of specks—planes in flight. From the direction in which they were moving they were undoubtedly McCall's flight of S. E.'s from No. 24, which was to accompany them over their target, the ammunition dump at Marchepot—a good twelve miles into enemy territory.

Quarles glanced at the map pinned to the little board in his cockpit, but there was no need for him to bother about the course, for his was the simple task of following the leader, who was winging straight into the morning sun. Shortly the glare would be dazzling; but Verringer had already swung to the south, with the idea of approaching his target from that angle, and so avoiding the sun as far as he could.

They were well over the German lines now, and two tiny puffballs appeared well beneath and in front of the leading plane. Some energetic gunner had left his coffee substitute to get cold while he wasted a few shells. Where there had been two, there suddenly blossomed a cluster; and there came a *put-putter* behind Quarles, sensed rather than heard, which showed that Mac was testing his guns again.

Quarles banked a little to the right and fired a burst from each of the two Vickers guns fixed to the hood of the fuselage in front of him. Good! A jam would be bad business later. Familiar landmarks unreeled in the panorama beneath him. They were getting near now, and there was more Archie, but all falling short, for they were well up to fifteen thousand.

All at once Verringer signaled and banked sharply to the left. As Quarles tilted up on his wing, he looked down over the tip and saw the thin, even line of a railroad. That would be the line that ran through Marchepot into Peronne, a little farther north. He leveled off again and dipped his nose to follow the captain, who was now in a deep slanting dive, with engine full on, roaring down on the target straight ahead.

Quarles drew a deep breath. The needle on his altimeter flickered—fourteen—thirteen five—thirteen—twelve thirty. Was Verringer going to deliver the bombs at the back door? Twelve—eleven fifty—

A white light ball shot out from the back of the leading plane and hung in the air like fireworks in front of the courthouse on the 4th of July at home. On the target!

Quarles felt the sudden lift as Mac pulled the handles that released the two heavy bombs from the racks. Immediately the air was full of puffballs. There was a sudden jolt, and his bus tipped up crazily upon one wing. That had been a close one, but the plane still flew. There was no time to look around to see what damage had been done, for he was busy following his captain, who had swung around in a climbing half circle, heading home again. The altimeter read thirteen hundred.

There was another jolt that tipped his nose down abruptly, and Quarles侧 slipped out of the danger zone, whereupon everything happened all at once.

A something half seen swooped over his head, and the fuselage took on a new vibration as Mac went into action with his double Lewis guns. Tracer was jutting from the back seat of Verringer's plane in front, other tracer flitted by his face as there came to his ears, even above the roar of the engine, a new sound like the tearing of a gigantic warp of sturdy cloth. A Spandau gun!

Quarles's hour had come at last. The monotonous days of training, doing this maneuver and that against imaginary foes, the monotonous flights over the lines—all these stood his friends now, or how else would he have acquired the instinctive co-ordination of mind and hand that set his hand to act quicker than the mind could guide it?

He had swung to the right in a short, climbing turn when almost in his startled face loomed a huge black cross. Sucking in his breath and gripping the stick between his legs, he set his fingers to the trigger handles of his Vickers, and saw the tracer darting straight and sure into the cockpit of the enemy. The cross lurched out of his sights, to be replaced momentarily by a hideous goggled mask with the ear tabs flapping, and two hands upflung, before these, too, swept under him and away.

Coming out on even keel again, he saw

that the fight had passed him by. The flight was realigning its ragged formation, the two last planes being still engaged in some long range firing at two retreating Fokkers. Behind that a few remnants of battle separated themselves into their component parts, the enemy diving for safety toward the ground, the S. E.'s circling to resume their war array.

Quarles turned to look for Mac. That doughty warrior paused in putting on another drum to wave a jaunty hand.

It was not until he had released his belt on the drome that Quarles suddenly felt a weakness in his legs. He sat quiet in his seat for a moment before clambering out. Mac was already down and pointing silently to their left wing, whose outer tip was fretted into lacework.

"It's a very pretty job he made of it, but he'll not be makin' another, I'm thinkin'."

"Was that the one I shot at?" asked Quarles, and his voice sounded a little weak in his own ears.

"The same. He nearly got you when he dived, an' I'd 'a' had him fair in me sights but for some weird acrobatics you took the occasion to demonstrate. You near spilled me out, to say nothin' of makin' me drop a whole drum of ammunition overside. I hope it hit a Hun on the head!" he added vindictively.

Hoddy Rudge strolled up, slapping his big flying gloves against his thigh.

"Stout work, Yank! You must have got him with your first burst, when he zoomed up after overshooting you. Mac here was fillin' the air with lead. Man, but you waste the king's ammunition! I took a long pot at him myself, but I was too far for anything but a chance shot, so he belongs to you and Mac. He spun clear into the ground. They got poor old Piggy, though. Oh, well, the S. E.'s got a couple. Not a bad break!"

Mac made a clicking sound with his tongue against his teeth.

"Good old Piggy! That new observer of his couldn't shoot. Well, laddie, let's over to the mess and tak' a wee tot before lunch. We've earned it."

That afternoon they went over again, fighting their way back in a running battle that lasted clear to the lines; and after that something of the kind was their daily portion. The enemy was stiffening on their front, bringing up new flights to replace

the old, and beginning also to change his previous defensive tactics to those of attack.

V

So July drew on to a close in France that year, with new faces gradually outnumbering the old familiar ones about the mess table, while the old ones took on a leanness and a weariness they had not had before, for all that the laughter was as loud and the singing as lusty as it had ever been.

One day Danger and Baldy Barnes went over on an afternoon photographic flight, from which they did not return. The hangar squad, nevertheless, sent up rockets all through the dusk and into early night, hoping that they had been delayed somewhere and would still come slipping in, until the major sent word to have them stop.

"Tell 'em to stop the bloomin' fireworks," he growled, and the mess chalked up two more to the enemy's score.

The photographic officer grumbled about it when he came into the bar for a late drink.

"A brand-new camera gone, and we're short of lenses now! I don't know what I'm going to do, unless some of the birds over at No. 72 bag a Hun who's over takin' photos, and manage not to shoot the camera full of holes. I've asked 'em to be careful about the next one they see—try to wing him, y' know."

"Shut up, you ruddy scientist," Mac said grumpily, "an' mix another drink wi' the cheemicals you're soaked in. You an' your picture takin'! D'ye think you're at Brighton on a bank holiday?"

That night, while shaving, Quarles saw, even through the distortion of the tiny mirror, that his face was getting drawn, and that his eyes had taken on a strained, peering look. Some time after they had gone to bed, a sound wakened him, and, going to the door of the tent, he peered out into the moonlight. A column of artillery was halted in the road, and there came the squeak of sweaty leather and the tinkle of bit chains as the tired horses eased themselves and the men drowsed in the saddles or on the caissons.

Quarles turned to find Mac beside him, drawing in his breath in a soft whistle.

"Stuff movin' up all the time on all the roads. I haven't seen anything like this

since '15. There's somethin' big comin' off on this front, and what we've had up to now will be only play to what's to come, I'm thinkin'. Come on to bed, laddie—we'll need our beauty sleep."

Next day the Germans got Hunt somewhere up over Villers-Carbonnel, in a hot battle at fourteen thousand—Hunt, the irrepressible baby of the squadron. Another photographic plane, with two of the newcomers to the squadron, crashed just within their own lines. Malvin, the photo officer, went up and salvaged what he could of the camera. The pilot and the observer were not so lucky.

Quarles and Mac had stopped going to Annabelle's now. The men who had once forgathered there were mostly gone, and those who had taken their places did not seem quite the same. The last evening the two friends had spent there had been solemn rather than hilarious. Anais sat between them at the big table, which they had all to themselves these days, and made aimless markings on it with her finger.

"I miss that M. Peegy," she said softly. "He was vary, vary *chic* and *toujours gai, n'est-ce pas?*"

When they came to go, she went with them to the door and took Mac by a button of his tunic.

"M. Mac, will you do a leetle thing for me—I liked that Peegy. Some day when you are over there"—she gestured vaguely toward the enemy—"will you throw overside these leetle flowers?"

She put a tiny nosegay in Mac's hand.

"Must think I'm a bloomin' valentine, goin' tootlin' around Hunland with love's sweet message," muttered Mac, as they walked back toward the drome.

He put the nosegay in his pocket, none the less, and later stuck it in a bottle in their tent.

When they came back from the afternoon raid next day, Quarles saw that the flowers were gone.

"What did you do with them, Mac?"

"Threw them away."

"Yes, and took them ten miles into Hunland to do it! I saw you—over Brie Bridge."

"Well, that's as near as we got to where she wanted them to go, isn't it?"

Mac looked up belligerently. Tempers were on edge those days, and Quarles turned away with a little choke in his throat.

So they did not go back to Annabelle's. Rather they sought out the gay crowds and tumult of the cafés in Amiens, and became insatiable seekers after riotous binges with other squadrons. In these, too, there were more strange faces than familiar ones, but they had long ago stopped inquiring after those they did not see, for the past was dead with its dead. The future, of course, was dead anyway.

In a whirl of excitement, and amid the stimulation of a crowd, one did not have time to think. Only sometimes when Quarles and Mac walked out together in the summer evenings, thought came—and very strange thought it was. It seemed then that that other life they lived in the reek of petrol, the roar of motors, and the stuttering of guns was a dream—the countryside was so peaceful; but the next day they were back again, carrying their bomb cargoes and fighting those grim, stern fights—each time a little grimmer and sterner—to get over the rough line that marked their trenches.

Once, when they had strolled out after dinner, Quarles suddenly broke the moody silence.

"Mac, once, you remember, I was asking for something big and grand to do. Now the only thing I'm asking for is the guts to carry on and—and not let down the old crowd that's gone west. If I can only last it through—"

Mac walked on for a space without speaking. When he did speak, his voice was husky.

"Stout heart does it, laddie—stout heart. That's what we're askin' for—all of us. We'll carry on!" He was silent for a moment, and when he resumed his face had the old cheerful grin. "I'm just rememberin' that No. 4 is givin' a big binge to-night. Come on, laddie—let's wangle a side car and go over!"

They went, and later Quarles helped to carry on his shoulders, for a triumphal parade around the mess, Bugs Beattie, who was celebrating his fifteenth enemy balloon. Mac outdid even his previous performances in his native dance, and the breaking of glass and furniture was terrific.

That was about the end for them. They could not go on forever, and they were almost the veterans of the squadron now. Cunningham of B Flight had gone down over Estrées in a glorious battle, in which he and his observer had accounted for three

of the stinging swarm that got him. Navin, Captain Green's observer, had been taken out of his cockpit on the drome with a German bullet through his hips, and had died as they put him into the ambulance. Green himself, with a new observer, had dropped out somewhere north of Proyart.

Verringer was still hanging on, but his nerve was cracking. One morning he led them into a nest of Fokker triplanes and gaudy Albatrosses near Peronne, and before he could extricate his flight they had lost three planes. Bucking a head wind, they were fighting a desperate and losing battle for home and safety, when a flight of Camels appeared miraculously, and, though hopelessly outnumbered, dashed in to help. In the confusion the D. H. 4's limped to shelter. It cost—Lord, how it cost; but they held stubbornly to the air those days.

It seemed to Quarles sometimes that every one he had ever known had gone, and that only he and Mac were left for some inscrutable reason of the god of battles, who would work around to them in his own good time. The people whom the young flyer had known before the war—even the dear ones whom he had left behind—were like characters in a book he had read. He could never renew their dim acquaintance, for the book was lost.

To write to Mary was an impossibility. What was the use? Each day he thought of it, but he never took up the pen. He found himself going back to his childhood at the oddest moments—in the air, or even at the mess table—and murmuring little prayers to himself. Only these prayers were different from the ones he had lisped then. Now they were simple variations of one theme:

"God, please help me to carry through! Please, God, give me the guts to stick it out!"

VI

QUARLES and Mac had come back one summer morning from a dawn patrol that had been quite peaceful. They were going to the squadron office to report, and found the major on the telephone there.

"Right-o!" he said at last, and hung up. "Just the same," he added to the intelligence officer as he went out, "it's a rotten waste, and I'm short of planes now."

Quarles and Mac went over to the mess for their second breakfast. They were

just spreading jam on toast when an orderly came in and saluted.

"Major Corcoran's compliments, and will you report to him in his quarters at once?"

Wearily they left the jam and went across, still munching. They had long since ceased to speculate about anything, even about the time when their numbers might be expected to turn up in the great lottery they were playing. They found the major pacing moodily up and down, while the intelligence officer sat by the table, turning over some maps.

"Oh, there you are!" said the major. "I'm no end sorry for what I have to ask you lads. You must be jolly tired and all that, but Wing's been dinging my ear off all day yesterday and to-day about some pictures. I sent Kip and Woodward out this morning, but I've just heard from the balloon section that they went down back of the enemy's lines, so that's that. Wing says they have to have those pictures, and for some reason or other Fritz is set on seeing that we don't get 'em, so I'm sending you two. You, Quarles, are as experienced a pilot as we've got, and you, MacLeod, are the oldest observer, so go to it. Manley here will give you the map marks, and Malvin is having a camera put in your bus. Just one word more—bring those pictures back. If you must crash, do it somewhere behind our lines, and do it on a wing or something, so that the plates don't get crocked up. I don't imagine, though, that you'll have any trouble. Fritz probably isn't expecting another try right off, and there's a flight of Camels supposed to meet you around the lines, near Warfusee, though Lord knows where they'll be. There's so much war around these days that they're always chasing their tails all over the place after something. Anyway, bring those pictures back, or I'll have every brass hat in France on my bally neck. Cheerio!"

The major looked at them for a moment, hesitated, as if he had thought of something, thought better of whatever it was, thrust his hands in his pockets, and walked out. Manley, the intelligence officer, spoke briskly.

"It's not very far—over beyond Marcelcave a bit. Just a picnic for you two. Here are the maps, all marked."

There were a few words about the location of the spot, and Quarles and Mac

started for the drome, buckling the collars of their flying jackets as they went. Mechanics were swarming about their plane, tightening wires and making all secure. Two new drums were brought for the Lewis guns and handed up to the man in the cockpit, while another brought fresh belts for the Vickers and made all ready there. Beneath the fuselage the finishing touches were being put to the installation of the camera.

The gas wagon trundled away from in front of the nose, and a sergeant climbed into the front cockpit to tune up the engine, while another grimy workman stood by to swing the prop. The engine roared into full diapason and died away again to a steady chuckle as Quarles made ready to take the sergeant's place.

"All hunky, sergeant?"

"Like a clock, sir."

Malvin pulled at the leg of Mac's flying suit, and he stopped half in and half out of his cockpit.

"Man," begged the intelligence officer, almost tearfully, "take care of that camera! It's my last lens."

Mac craned his neck around.

"Go on, you bloomin' ghoul, wi' your salvagin' an' scrougin'. 'Tis a Sunday on the Thames we're goin' out for. I'd ask you along, darlin', but there isn't room. All clear, laddie!"

They trundled out on the field. All at once Quarles felt very, very lonely, as he turned to look at the little knot of officers and men standing there watching them. It reminded him of his first flight alone at the training center. There they had stood then, his companions and the instructors, and he had felt that a great gulf separated him from all the rest of the world. So it was at the present moment, and he took a deep breath.

There was a job to do—better hop to it! He took the plane off the ground.

When he turned, as he always did, to look back at the field, he saw that the men were not going back to their various jobs, as usual, but still stood in a compact little group, with their white faces turned up to stare at the diminishing plane. Mac waved to them from his cockpit and turned to grin cheerfully at Quarles, who had settled down to his work. They were to meet the Camels near Warfusee, and he swung to the left to come upon the lines at the right point.

The morning was beautiful, the sky light blue, flecked immediately above him with scattered clouds that merged in front of him, into a darker and more solid bank. When he reached ten thousand feet, he eased down the engine and began to look about for his convoy. There they were, five of them, almost over the trenches, at about thirteen thousand, and climbing. The clouds were more frequent up here, but only light wisps that went scudding by the wing tips. Good picture weather!

Picture weather! All at once, with photographic accuracy, his father's studio, of which he had not thought in months, flashed before his eyes. Good old dad would be putting about in it as usual. By no stretch of the imagination, probably, could he picture the present surroundings of his son, though both were busied about the same job. Good old dad! If only Quarles could drop in on him now! If he could, he would stay there and never go back—never go back. War! What was it all about, anyway? Quarles caught himself and bit his lip.

"Please, God, give me the guts to go on—just for a little while! I'm not asking much. Please, God, don't let me down now!"

He had been tired when he left the drome; he was very, very tired now. Why couldn't the end come to-day? It had to come some time. When it came, there would be an end, too, to this eternal struggle to keep faith with Danger and Piggy and Baldy and Hunt and all the rest. They weren't always at "stand by" now. Why couldn't he hear the "dismiss," as they had?

Dimly he heard Mac testing his guns. Guns, always guns! He tested his own and looked over the side. Almost there, but what was Mac signaling about? Mac and he had done this sort of job many times before. A straight trip up over the area marked in red on the map, and a straight trip back. Back and forth, back and forth like a sight-seeing bus.

Mac was pointing to the north. That was it—there was a dog fight going on up there. Quarles could see the glint and sparkle of the sun on flashing wings, and their convoy, of course, had gone barging off to take a hand. Well, there was nothing in sight, except a cloud with a coppery luster hanging a few thousand above and in front. Clouds were bad things,

though this one looked innocent enough. If there had been any Germans up there, they would probably have been down before this.

Quarles was at the end of the marked area, and he turned south again, so that the cloud was behind him now. It bothered him for some reason, and he turned to peer at it, noticing as he did so that only the top of Mac's helmet showed in the rear cockpit. Mac would be busy with his camera.

One more trip over the map square, and they would be done. Manley had called it a picnic, and he was right.

Quarles was just beginning his bank for the last run north when he saw them—four of them, coming full tilt out of the cloud at him, broadside. In the split second that he hung there, staring up over his wing, he had time to admire the awful beauty of them, roaring down on the two-seater, their exhausts spitting flame, the wisps of the mist that had hidden them shredding from their wing tips.

A great exaltation came to Quarles. He waved his hand and screamed out loud, though no sound came to his ears. In the flash that had run through his veins, burning up fatigue and fear and all such little things, he had kicked his bank into a dive and opened his throttle wide to give him speed. Down in a breath taking swoop, then up, and almost over he rolled, thwarting their aim momentarily, though splinters flew before his goggles and the edge of his top wing flayed into threads. They had been too sure of him!

Now Quarles became the attacker, and it was not a plane of wood and fabric that he drove, but himself and Mac, fused by some alchemy of battle into a human projectile. Full in his sights he caught one, and he had time to see the spurt of flame that followed his shot.

The air was full of fiery darts and pinwheels, and he lost all knowledge of what he did with the controls, pressing the trigger handles until his fingers were numb. They were diving on him from everywhere, and where they dived he was not. Now one and now another he caught momentarily in his sights and fired until they were gone.

Another plane flashed in front of him, and his finger was pressing the trigger when he saw in the nick of time that it was a Camel come from nowhere. On his

next roll he saw that another German was tumbling down, the Camel wobbling after it and trailing smoke. He plunged headlong at another swift and gaudily daubed shape that flashed before his eyes. When he came out of that dive, he floated out into a most marvelous quiet. The enemy had gone!

By instinct purely, Quarles put his plane on a course that led toward the lines. It handled poorly, and he had to fight the controls with an ever increasing weight of lead in his arms and shoulders. One shoulder prickled, and he wondered dimly if some of the splinters he had seen at the beginning of the fight had penetrated his heavy flying suit.

His mind worked sluggishly. He could not remember what he had been doing out there. Oh, yes—he had been taking pictures with Mac!

With a great effort he turned around to look for Mac, but could see nothing of him. Well, they had been almost ready to start for home, and they had better get back there now, for there was something wrong with the good old bus. In spite of all he could do, it kept losing altitude, and there was some kind of liquid on the floor of the cockpit—from a punctured oil connection, probably, only oil was not red.

Then in a wave it all came to him. The end he had hoped for had passed him by again, and he had it all to do over—the flying and the fighting and the wondering about carrying on. He would let the plane flop. It wanted to, and only by an effort that became more and more impossible could he keep it straight.

There was something that the major had said. Good old beggar, the major! He had said something about having all the brass hats after him if they didn't bring back the pictures. Well, Quarles couldn't let that happen. He would take the pictures back, and then he would stop carrying on and go home to dad. Dad always delivered the pictures when he said he would. Quarles & Son always delivered the goods.

There was the ground—a lot of ground, and zigzag trenches. Quarles was over his own lines, then. Let it drop! The ground was swooping up, only sometimes he saw it through his propeller, and then right up over a wing tip—which was queer.

The major had said something else. Oh, yes—land on a wing. He knew how to

side-slip, if the major wanted him to. Side-slip it was. So—

The wing hit and crumpled. The fabric wrapped Quarles round in a winding sheet, and all the noise of all the guns he had ever heard burst in a final salvo in his head.

VII

THEY talked about them late that night in the mess, the major and the adjutant and the flight captains and other mighty warriors, standing at the bar with a last drink in their hands.

"A priceless show," said the major. "Crashed all to kingdom come about a mile back of the lines, but he came down on a wing. MacLeod, the canny old Scot, had managed to wrap the box of plates in his flying suit before he passed out, and there were only a couple cracked. Malvin went up and got them, and had them developed right away; and after all the fuss there wasn't a thing on them."

"So it all went for nothing," said one of the new captains.

"What? My word, no! Wing's no end puffed up about it. I've just come back from there, and the whole thing was that they wanted to know whether there was or was not anything in that particular spot. Now they know there isn't, they can go ahead with some bally show or other they've got in mind. Lord, but I'd like to have seen that fight! Dozey got there in his Camel just before the end, but the Hun

he bagged punctured his oil feed, and he only just managed to limp home. It was all over then, anyway, he told me. Said he'd never seen a D. H. 4 fought like a scout before. He expected to see the wings flop off any moment. The way the Yank and Mac were spraying the air, he said he didn't dare get too near; but they got two of the Huns and Dozey got one, and the fourth had to land. Some *strafe*, what?"

"Were they both killed?" asked a recruit observer.

"Killed? Not by a glass full! On his way back Malvin found out they were at Base 52, and he saw them. Mac was as tight as a tick from the rum they'd given him, but right as rain outside of a broken arm and a bullet or two in the leg. The Yank was a lot worse off, Malvin said—clear off his head. Malvin couldn't make anything of it. When he told the Yank what a fine show every one thought they'd put on, he got a dreamy look in his eye and said something about him and dear old dad having a corner on taking all the pictures in the bally town. Balmy, what? But the medico said he'd be all right. A shot in the shoulder, and one in the side, and a crack on the head. They'll both be in England to-morrow, and no more war for them. The Scot wanted Malvin to put in for a medal for him, because he'd saved the camera. Pretty stout beggars, what?"

MIRAGE

Across the fevered heat of desert sands
I glimpsed one day a green oasis fair;
Its feathery palm trees beckoned like cool hands,
A silver pool invited me to quaff;
But when I sought in heaven-glad surprise
Fulfillment of the promise that it held,
It vanished into air before my eyes,
And left me knowing it was but mirage.

I glimpsed one night a rare and radiant being
Across the desert spaces of my life;
With parted lips and tender, wistful mien
She opened wide to me her lovely arms;
But when I sought in heaven-glad surprise
Fulfillment of the promise that she held,
She melted into mist before my eyes—
And then I knew that she was but mirage.

G. Marian Burton

From Tee to Tea

AND FROM TEA AND VARIOUS OTHER MEALS TO A WEDDING
LUNCHEON WHICH ENDED IN A WAY THAT SURPRISED
THE SELECT SOCIAL CIRCLES OF NEWHAMPTON

By Charles Divine

SILK stockings, a brief skirt, some curves, a tiny hat, under it two lips and a pair of eyes—example after shining example went along Park Avenue, bitterly watched by Roger Southwick as he lounged on Christopher Gould's window seat. What was the use of pretending an interest in anything—least of all, women—when a man was as penniless as he was?

Reflection on the state in which his father had died and left him—no money, and an expensive but highly useless education—only plunged Roger deeper into depression. Another year of this golden bummeling, even another month of this softly upholstered, parasitic dependence on Christopher and his bachelor apartment, and he would be ready to jump in the river!

Roger fell back on the window seat, supine and disgusted. He dropped the newspaper whose columns he had been searching, attempting to visualize himself in the rôle of a chauffeur, a butler, or a gardener—for business was out of the question. He closed his eyes on a suicidal vision of the world. When he opened them again, Christopher had returned from his coupon clipping in Wall Street.

"Man is sluggish in the horizontal position," remarked Roger, and sat up facing his friend. "That's a quotation from Goncourt; and that's the trouble with me—I know a lot of French observations, but what I want now is a good American job!"

He reached for the paper again. After a moment he paused, mystified by a certain item, and then suddenly jumped up, alert.

WANTED—Good-looking young man who would like to spend summer at well known resort. Must be expert at swimming, riding, tennis, golf, dancing, and bridge. Salary open.

Roger gasped.

"God has written a description of me!" he murmured.

II

DUDLEY PRESCOTT, a director of the Newhampton Chamber of Commerce, president of the Country Club, vice president of Kiwanis, member of the Live Wire Club and Home Citizenship League, held Newhampton and its happiness very close to his heart.

"A bigger and happier Newhampton" was one of his slogans.

That was why he took it upon himself to say to Roger:

"The younger married set of Newhampton is faced with a serious problem, Mr. Southwick. There are no unencumbered young men here. Wives whose husbands only get out from the city over the weekends have no one to take them about in the interim. Also, to be frank with you, they know one another's husbands too well to find them interesting for mild flirtations, or even as dancing partners. What happened, at first, was an outbreak of discontented murmurs about going abroad for the summer. In this dire event most of the houses would have been closed, and the husbands would have been shut off from a cool retreat a few days each week—and so the murmurs were stifled. Then a still more disconcerting thing occurred—Mrs. Donnington, a wealthy widow, imported a *gigolo*. I looked upon this worthless young lounge lizard with disgust, but when I heard the women speak with some envy of Mrs. Donnington, who always had a good-looking escort, I saw trouble in the air. Other wives could do the same thing, and the husbands would be helpless if a

group of young men suddenly arrived to spend the summer at the Newhampton Hotel. Among these young fellows there would be bounders who might cause a lot of trouble. Women are no students of character. Well, I got an idea that might solve the problem. Why not import special young men? I ought to be able to tell the good from the bad, and it would be better to beat the women to it. I've said nothing to their husbands about it. I decided to try one man, and then, if the scheme works, to get more. I'm explaining the causes behind my advertisement because it seems to me you are the right sort of young man."

Dudley Prescott leaned back from his desk, a stout, thoughtful, and prematurely bald Kiwanian.

"Your friend, Christopher Gould, is sufficient reference; and you seem to have just the right sort of education."

Roger groaned—but he took the job.

III

"You ought to like it here," said Prescott, with a congratulatory handshake, after Roger's first day in a small but comfortable suite at the Newhampton Hotel. "You are supposed to be a wealthy bachelor," he added, smiling.

"I'll try to grin and bear it," returned Roger.

Prescott's expression sobered. Again he was all business as he outlined Roger's daily schedule from 11 A.M. on, each hour prescribed, from the morning plunge in the ocean to the evening table of bridge.

"Here's the list of names, beginning with Mrs. Bond. I'll introduce you to her on the beach to-morrow."

There were twenty names on the list, and Roger began to have qualms. Then he thought of the salary, and said nothing.

"By the way," Prescott went on, "I ought to warn you that Mrs. Bond is more than ordinarily flirtatious; so go easy there. Her husband is jealous. He shot one of his wife's admirers."

Roger shivered.

"Killed him?"

"No, no—just winged him in the shoulder. The affair was hushed up all right. Let's see, what name will you go by? I think Trevor would be a good one—Robert Trevor. Don't you?"

"Trevor or Tremor. I feel more like the latter."

The Sunday plunge in the ocean was also Roger's first plunge into Newhampton's social sea, and his career began swimmingly. Inside of twenty-four hours he could look forward to a routine of perpetual engagements, thrust upon him by the very women named in Prescott's instructions.

He took it all gayly enough. On Monday, when the males of Newhampton went into New York to business, Roger's tall figure, with his dark head and careless, laughing eyes, moved from beach to cottage, and from cottage to country club, with an air of being at home though the husbands weren't.

"I'm getting a kick out of this," he chuckled. "Companion to the great feminine unrest!"

"Where have you been keeping yourself all these years?" Lillian Hayes demanded one afternoon, on the golf course, in a tone which indicated that the said years had been wasted away from her side.

"Oh, here and there," replied Roger casually. "You know how life is!"

Lillian flattered herself that she knew. She was blond, supple, and vivacious, and golfing was only one of the activities that kept her from thinking of the boredom involved in having chosen the easiest way by marrying Dick Hayes.

"How about some more golf to-morrow?" she asked when they sat on the clubhouse steps afterward.

"Fine!" replied Roger, obeying his instructions.

Between Lillian's driving personality on the golf course, Mrs. Bond's buxom bathing in the sea, and Eunice Mitchell's starved appetite for mixed tennis, Roger could feel himself undergoing enough physical exertion to condition a dozen men.

"Thank Heaven you haven't got a job!" remarked Mrs. Hayes.

Roger gave her a quick glance. She took it for something else, and drew closer to him on the step. A moment later, however, Mrs. Fordyne drove up in her roadster to take him off to her house. Lillian protested.

"You're altogether too popular here, Robert!"

Roger grinned.

"You know how life is—from tee to tea."

The next week it was "Bob," as far as Lillian was concerned, and the week after,

"Bob, dear," followed in less than due time by such complaints as—

"Listen, darling—if you don't make better love to me, I won't sit out another dance with you!"

Roger gazed across the shadows toward the lighted clubhouse windows, and re-torted:

"I'm doing the best I know how. I aim to please."

"Then," said Lillian, lifting her mouth close to him, "aim a little higher!"

Roger suddenly disentangled himself, because he saw Lillian's husband approaching.

"Don't get up," said Dick Hayes, when he was close enough to recognize them. "I was looking for somebody else. My mistake! Pardon the intrusion."

"Damn a husband like that!" said Lillian vehemently, when she saw that Roger was bent on returning to the clubhouse.

"Oh, don't blame him," said Roger lightly. "He meant well. You know how life is."

Dudley Prescott stopped Roger in the clubhouse, and drew him aside.

"Listen, Southwick—I've arranged this business for the benefit of the other fellows, and I never expected to take advantage of it myself. Besides, my wife and I get on all right together. The only trouble just now is that Marcia has taken up archery. She's miserable because I can't catch an early train out from the office to-morrow afternoon and play with her before dinner. Will you run over about four o'clock to help her set up her archery thingumajig in the garden, and teach her what to do?"

"Sure!" said Roger. "You're the boss." But to himself he groaned: "Have I descended to bows and arrows?"

IV

ROGER was seated in the chair nearest the living room door when he saw a girl descending the stairs—tall, slenderly round, with jet-black hair drawn startlingly back from her face. It wasn't only her beauty that suddenly stirred him, but something else in her eyes—something deeper and more intensely alive than he had ever seen before. He found himself rising to his feet long before the others in the room were aware of Betty's approach.

"This is my sister, Betty Callendar,"

said Lillian Hayes, and Roger was struck with wonder that a rather ordinary-looking woman like Lillian could have a sister like Betty.

He could see a certain resemblance in the finely chiseled nose and chin; but Betty's mouth was firmer and less selfish than Lillian's, and the whole expression of her face was different.

"Why haven't I heard of you before?" Roger asked Betty at dinner.

"S-s-s-sh!" she whispered, smiling. "Don't let the others hear! I'm a poor relation. I work for a living."

"Really? That accounts for it, then."

"For what?"

"The difference between you and the others."

"That line has a familiar sound!"

"But I mean it," Roger insisted. "What do you do?"

"Are you going to spoil my only vacation in the haunts of the idle rich by making me confess that I'm a stenographer?"

"That's nothing to be ashamed of. It's an honorable job."

"I'm not ashamed of it."

"You couldn't possibly have anything to be ashamed of," Roger told her.

He spoke with such sudden and startling fervor that for a moment the lovely girl gazed at him wide-eyed, with fascinating depths in her glance.

"Nevertheless," she said, maintaining her light tone, "I'm a source of chagrin to Lillian. She wants me to give up stenography for Newhampton."

All at once Roger knew. On the other side of Betty sat Philip Craig, one of the richest men in the community, still content to be pursued by women and remain a middle-aged bachelor, idle, conceited, sybaritic.

So that was why Mrs. Hayes had invited Craig! It made Roger's blood boil. It was the sort of thing Lillian Hayes would do. His disgust grew in proportion to his realization of what a lovely person Betty was, how candid, how enchanting, how disarming.

In the moonlight flooding the garden he roamed with her out to the steps leading to the trellised walk and the swimming pool beyond, gleaming like a huge opal in a marble setting. They lingered there, talking. Roger exulted at being where he was instead of indoors, attending to Lillian's frivolous chatter and her sticky, am-

orous hands. It would be bad enough tomorrow—two hours on the golf course with her!

Roger began to regard his daily schedule with increasing disapproval. It kept him away from Betty. He would stand in front of his mirror as he shaved himself in the morning, with the sunshine pouring through the open windows of the Newhampton Hotel, and would tell himself, as he stretched his arms with a feeling of physical well-being:

"I ought to be digging ditches to-day!"

Then his eye would fall on his engagement book, with its penciled entries:

11.00—Janet Bond—beauty and the beach.
12.30—Lunch, Agnes Aiken—car crazy.
2.30—Eunice—still tennising at love forty.
4.00—Golf—Lillian again, damn it!
6.00—Cocktails with Mrs. Heustis—poison!
7.00—Dinner with Fanchon Rand—romance and rheumatism.
9.00—Lillian's dancing—a rush of jazz to an otherwise empty brain.

He couldn't wait for the evenings to come, when he might capture moments alone with Betty—achieved with no little difficulty in view of her sister's efforts to marry her to Craig. Philip Craig, for the first time in his life, was willing to marry.

"But you mustn't!" cried Roger, facing her on the garden steps a few nights later. His brain swirled with the sense of Betty's beauty. "You mustn't marry a man like Craig!"

"Why not?"

Betty gazed at him in a kind of soft, level-eyed trance.

"Because I want you to marry me."

"Bob!"

The one word, the false name under which he was masquerading, stabbed him like a blow. She didn't know! Her half caught breath could only gasp the name by which the others called him. He stretched out his arms as if groping through the dark, and the next moment his heart fairly leaped within him as he felt Betty's head on his shoulder and her face against his.

He kissed her long and rapturously.

"I knew I was going to love you," he said after a while. "I felt it like fate!"

They both gazed in silence across the lawn, bound by a communion deeper than all words.

"I didn't know I was going to," said Betty at length; "but I felt it growing and

growing." Suddenly she laughed through excess of happiness. "It was almost like an electric storm!"

Roger kissed her again.

"I wish you'd call me Roger, instead of Bob," he said.

"Why?"

"Oh, it's what everybody called me at college. Out here they don't know any better. Won't you, dear?"

"Of course!"

They discussed their engagement. Roger insisted that it must be kept quiet.

"But why?" demanded Betty.

"Oh, it's hard to explain, dear, but I would prefer to keep it quiet a little while. I don't want everybody out here to know about it until I get some things arranged—some business of mine."

He was ashamed of his means of earning a living, and it made him doubly wretched to think that he couldn't tell Betty the truth. He would look for another job at once, and as soon as he found one he would tell Dudley Prescott that his work for the relief of feminine unrest was at an end.

"What is your business, Bob—Roger, I mean? I haven't the vaguest notion. People say you're rich, but I hope you're something apart from that—you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes!" he returned hastily, thoroughly miserable. "Yes—quite apart from that. As soon as I can tell you all about it, I will. It's—it's rather a ticklish business just at present. You—you trust me, don't you?"

For answer she lifted her face again to his, and said simply:

"I love you!"

In three words she had said everything.

When they returned to the house, he felt like kicking himself all the way back into the living room. Why had he got into such an ignominious position? He couldn't laugh any more at Lillian's sallies or return her hand pressures when they danced. The thought that he was receiving a salary for this—so much a laugh, so much a hand pressure—made him sick of the whole business.

He had to look on while Philip Craig leaned over Betty and fawned upon her. He had to endure a quarter of an hour's talk with Dick Hayes, who intermittently attended Lillian's parties. At other times he chased around with Doris Browne—

when Doris's husband was being intermittent somewhere else.

Dick Hayes stood in front of Roger, arrogant and supercilious, kneading the waxed end of his mustache between a long, soft thumb and a long, soft forefinger.

"Listen, Bob!" he began again. "I've got another good story I bet you haven't heard—"

"I've heard it!" said Roger abruptly, and turned away.

Dick stared after him, surprised.

Roger stood alone on the veranda steps, inhaling the night air in great gulps. He hoped it would cool the fever of his brow. Why hadn't he known three months ago that he would meet a girl like Betty? His whole life would have been different.

V

"MR. HUMPHREY has passed you on to me with a favorable report," said Wayne Willis, president of the Blizzard Refrigerator Company. Mr. Humphrey was the manager, who had advertised for an assistant. "I am favorably impressed with you, too, Mr. Southwick. We've got a big business here, as you know, and we'll pay a good salary to our assistant manager; but I learned the business from the ground up, so to speak, canvassing from house to house, and Humphrey did the same thing when he started here. I'll engage you, Southwick, if you'll do the same thing—if you'll begin as a salesman."

Into Mr. Willis's round, serious face, with the huge lenses of his spectacles shining like two pieces of ice, Roger suddenly laughed. It wasn't an insolent laugh, but it expressed his amused reaction to the suggestion that he should go about Newhampton as a refrigerator salesman, calling at the kitchen doors of houses which he had been accustomed to enter from the front—and find cracked ice waiting in a glass for him.

He politely declined Mr. Willis's offer.

"Listen, Bob!" said Dick Hayes unctuously, drawing Roger aside after dinner, a few evenings later. "I have something for you to do. Rush Lillian over to the country club and keep her there until midnight. Doris is going to drop in here, and I want the coast clear. Get me?"

Roger gave him a level look.

"Perfectly; but I must decline your coast guard service."

He was thinking of Betty, now outside on the veranda with Craig. In his revulsion of feeling toward all that he had been here in Newhampton, he couldn't possibly share in Dick Hayes's illicit projects.

Dick followed the direction of Roger's gaze, and said with cool arrogance:

"I'm paying Prescott a share of your high salary. He let me in as a partner, so to speak. This is no time for you to get snooty!" Roger flushed, astonished. "Besides," added Dick, his eyes narrowing as he made the threat, "if you won't kick in for me to-night, let me warn you that I'll tell Betty Callendar the nature of your employment here."

Roger stared, aghast. He saw that Dick meant it.

"You *would* do that, wouldn't you?"

Dick nodded with maddening insolence.

"I know you're in love with Betty. I don't miss a trick!"

Roger doubled up his fists and thrust them into his pockets, confronting Dick furiously.

"You just miss getting a high-salaried punch in the face!"

Dick laughed, but not too easily.

"Suit yourself. Either Lillian goes to the dance with you, or Betty knows!"

Roger stood reflecting painfully on the best course of action. Why not go to Betty ahead of Hayes, and test her love for him by telling her everything? He determined to do it.

"I'll tell her myself," he said.

"That gives me a laugh!" retorted Dick. "I know what she'll say!"

He turned away and left Roger pondering doubtfully. The situation was a difficult one. A quick decision was necessary, however, and after a moment Roger pulled himself together and made a bee line for the veranda.

Lillian Hayes tried to waylay him *en route*, and his brusqueness in dealing with her brought a flush of anger to her face.

"You ought to have sense enough to leave Betty alone with Craig once in a while!" she told him.

But Roger kept on. As he walked alone with Betty in the garden, five minutes later, he plunged at once into his confession. The electric light streaming out from the *porte cochère* illuminated the lane of shrubbery where she paused, astonished.

"So that's why Bob Trevor isn't your real name!" she finally said.

Roger caught the hurt tone of her voice, the unutterable pain in her eyes.

"But I didn't know you then, Betty," he returned desperately, seeing the revulsion of feeling that was sweeping over her. "I didn't know that there was anybody in the world like you. Won't you forgive me? I'm going to make a new and better start."

"A paid parlor lizard!" she interrupted fiercely. "Oh, how could you sink so low?" For a moment she was on the verge of tears—hot, blinding tears which she only kept back with an effort. "And I thought I loved you!"

"You do, you do," urged Roger in despair. "Don't let this spoil everything—"

"Our engagement is broken," she returned. "You said once that you admired me for being a secretary, for choosing work that was hard but honorable. Can't you realize that I loathe such a deception as yours? Why, for all your criticism of his idleness, Phil Craig is a thousand times better than you are!"

"Listen, Betty!" he begged.

"I don't want to hear! I hate you!"

She turned on her heel instantly. He watched her retreating figure enter the house, while he stood in the garden with the whole world crashing into chaos about him. He felt as if a rain of great fragments of earth and rock were falling upon him after some terrible upheaval, pelting his brain mercilessly. He closed his eyes and then opened them again—and saw the house as merely a blur of windows against the night.

Then he began to walk. He walked up and down the gravel paths for an hour. He heard Lillian's voice calling to him, but paid no heed. Finally, when he entered the house, he was greeted by Lillian's elated announcement:

"Big news, Bob! Betty's going to marry Phil!"

Roger caught his breath, stunned.

Lillian's gesture united the couple at once—Betty, who sat, flushed and still, at one end of a davenport, and Craig, who turned toward Roger with a triumphant look and waited to be congratulated.

But Roger said nothing to Craig. Instead, he turned to Lillian.

"I congratulate you on your diplomacy, Mrs. Hayes," he said coldly.

Craig rose, indignant.

"Come on, Trevor—be a man!"

"Don't call me Trevor!" returned Roger, and strode out of the room.

VI

ROGER was so furious—with himself, rather than with any one else—that he went at once to the Blizzard Refrigerator Company and told Mr. Willis he would gladly accept his proposal, if it was still open.

"Fine!" said Mr. Willis. "I'll be glad to have you take the job; but in fairness to you I want to warn you that you'll have trouble breaking down sales resistance."

"How's that?"

"A great many people don't want to install our Blizzard refrigerator. You've got to convince them of its good points."

"I see! They resist, and I insist. I should think everybody ought to be glad to have an electric ice machine like the Blizzard. It's infinitely better than the old-fashioned ice box, which you have to have an iceman tramp into the house every day to fill."

"That's just the trouble. A lot of women prefer to have the iceman call. They like that personal touch."

Roger grinned.

"I saw an example of it only the other day. Mrs. Prescott's cook was kissing the iceman on the back porch."

Mr. Willis nodded gravely.

"That's exactly what we're up against," he said.

"I see—we're up against back porch resistance. Well, Mr. Willis, I'll do my best to break it down."

"Fine! You'll only have to go out selling for three weeks. Then you can come into the office with Humphrey."

Only three weeks! To Roger the days seemed endless, while he punished himself by driving one of the shiniest cars, with the Blizzard refrigerator advertisements on both sides, up and down the streets. He stopped at hundreds of places and interviewed scores of housewives.

At first the people he knew were puzzled.

"Why, Bob Trevor, what's the joke?"

"The joke's on me. I'm a refrigerator salesman. I want to interest you in the new Blizzard. It makes its own ice within its own walls, and your cook isn't wasting her time hanging around the iceman's neck. In other words, the Blizzard takes the sex appeal out of the ice problem."

Dudley Prescott, who had lost him as an employee, told him:

"You certainly made a radical change!"

After the story of his new employment had gone the rounds of the social set, Roger discovered that not a few women, out of curiosity, gave up their allegiance to their ice box and expressed themselves as willing to listen to Roger's sales talk.

"We never had a salesman pick up so many new prospects before," Mr. Willis told him, delighted. "You certainly show the right interest in the business!"

"Don't thank me," returned Roger, modest and businesslike. "It's due to the superior quality of our product."

Newhampton enjoyed the story, and Roger grinned and bore the publicity he got. Twice he stopped his salesman's car to talk to Betty—once blocking her way when she showed every intention of avoiding the interview; but each time she drove on, in Lillian's roadster, and spurned his appeal.

Each time, however, after the encounter, she was silent and moody for a long time. Seeing Roger driving about in his Blizzard car, apparently happy in his resolution to stick to an honest job, renewed her misery. Could she still go ahead and marry Phil Craig?

Lillian noticed Betty's moments of depression, and was quick to urge Craig to hasten their wedding, with the result that the announcement, headed "Craig-Calendar Wedding Thursday," appeared in an early issue of the Newhampton *Gazette*. The *Gazette* seized upon society events for the benefit of the majority of its readers—butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers—whose attitude toward the social elect was one of interested curiosity.

Roger read the item on a stool in a lunchroom, just after he had received a fresh cup of coffee from the boiling hot spigot—and immediately knocked over his cup. The hot liquid on his hand stung less than these lines of print, setting forth the place and time—Dick Hayes's summer home at 2 P.M. The ceremony was to be preceded by a luncheon party, to be attended by persons "prominent in Newhampton society."

On Thursday, the day set for the wedding, Roger's lunchroom breakfast, entered upon in the lowest of spirits, was marked by the discovery of another item in the *Gazette*.

"Jilted suitor fights ice trust to cool anguish," the headline informed the local

world. "Newhampton society amused at story of young man who turns from dinner coat to overalls."

As Roger passed through the alleyway beside the office, to get his car, Mr. Willis hailed him from the platform outside his door, and said sympathetically:

"I'm sorry about that piece in the *Gazette*. I—I didn't know, Southwick. You needn't sell any more, if you don't want to. You can begin in the office to-day."

Roger considered a moment.

"I might as well finish the week out," he said finally, and got his car.

With Betty married to Craig, he might just as well drive to the end of the world and jump off!

VII

THE guests at the wedding luncheon pushed back their chairs, in the last excited flurry of talk after the *demitasses*, and prepared to rise. In the drawing-room the clergyman was already waiting, but here in the dining room, around the big table, they lingered to enjoy their cigarettes and make last-minute witticisms at the expense of the groom.

Craig bore their joking in high spirits. Across the table from him sat Betty—beside her sister Lillian—tensely twisting her napkin in her lap.

Craig rose.

"Come on, Lillian!" he called. "Bring on the bride!"

It was the signal for everybody to rise, and for the excitement to grow more diffused. Betty stood up and gripped the edge of the table. Her face was very white.

"I can't!" she whispered to Lillian. "I can't go on with it!"

"Don't be a fool!" breathed Lillian in her ear. "Pull yourself together!"

She linked her arm in Betty's and started around the table. Craig came forward to meet them.

Betty felt her heart pounding violently and her breath caught in the pain of an almost overwhelming suffocation. As she passed a large bay window, open to the scented airs of the lawn and the flower beds, she turned her face toward it greedily, as if any breath from outdoors might relieve this terrible pressure upon her.

Suddenly she halted at the window, arrested by a sight that released all the pressure and made her heart leap with a wild sense of freedom. It was Roger in his

white duck working clothes, carrying an armful of sales literature to the house next door.

Betty saw him pause, turn, and stare fixedly at the house in which she was so soon to be married, and then lower his head in despair. In that moment she felt an answering tug at her own heart.

"Roger!" she cried.

She darted away from Lillian's side abruptly, reached the veranda door in a few steps, and flew across the lawn, treading recklessly on the flower beds, while the win-

dows behind her filled with curious, startled faces. A minute later she was sitting beside Roger on the front seat of the Blizzard Refrigerator Company's car, with her head resting happily on Roger's shoulder.

As Roger started the car, Craig came across the lawn, sputtering with rage. He was too late. His last view of the bride-to-be showed her vanishing down the road beside Roger, and all that met Craig's furious gaze was the sign on the side of the car:

KEEP COOL!

"Topaz Efrem"

AN OLD GYPSY OF THE BANAT TELLS OF THE WORST MISTAKE HE EVER MADE, AND AT THE SAME TIME SHOWS HIMSELF NOT WHOLLY LACKING IN BUSINESS ABILITY

By Milan Popovic

"YOU ask me how I became Topaz Efrem?" said the old gypsy. "It was when I tried to steal the horses of the Yankovici, in Perlez. That's when I became Topaz. I shall never forget it, either."

"Tell me about it. How did it happen?" I asked, settling myself more comfortably.

"All right—I'll tell you about it," Topaz Efrem readily agreed. "Could you give me a cigarette? My tobacco got wet in the rain last night. It was a nasty night. I'll take two, so that I won't have to ask you again so soon," he said, taking three of my cigarettes.

Putting two of them in his box, on top of the tobacco—which to all appearances was perfectly dry—he lighted one with a burning stick from the camp fire. For an instant his deeply furrowed copper-colored face glowed in the flickering flame.

The fire shed its glare in a small circle, flashing back from the silver buttons, each the size of an egg, on Topaz Efrem's coat. The shaggy dog lying behind its master, with its head between its clumsy paws, eyed me with unconcealed distrust. Against

a star-studded sky the gypsy's covered wagon was silhouetted, its empty shafts pointing imploringly skyward. Not far off the horses were rustling and munching in the tall grass of the endless plain of the Banat.

"Well, I'll tell you about it, though I don't like to recall that affair. It brings a shiver down my spine when I think of it."

Topaz Efrem twitched nervously.

"This is how it happened—the three of us, myself, Masha Blacksmith, and Yotza Violinist, decided we would steal a pair of beautiful bays, the pride of the rich Yankovici, in Perlez. The peasants in these parts always have good horses, but those two bays were on top of them all. The king would be proud to have them in his stable, and I know horseflesh when I see it. I often looked at them when the Yankovici would drive them to a fair, and wished they were mine, but I thought there was nothing to be done there. The three brothers Yankovici were all young, and just out of the army. My heart ached, but I feared them, for they would have roasted me alive if they caught me stealing

the bays. The peasants hereabouts are a hard lot anyhow, and one has to be careful when meddling with their horses. They prize them more than their children. I tell you I know my trade!

"Well, I would have left those horses alone, for I am not looking for trouble. The beauty of our trade is to keep on the safe side; but that same Masha Blacksmith, he talked me into it. He says to me, that same Masha:

"Efrem, did you see those horses? How would you like to take them around to the fairs over the border in Roumania, with a nice bill of sale? I can get that for you. Just think how everybody would look at them!"

"No, Masha, that is all nonsense," I say to him. "Those brothers are watching them as if they were the pupils of their eyes."

"He says to me again, that same Masha:

"That is nothing, Efrem. I'm sure we could get them."

"You know how hard it is to get a gypsy to steal horses. It's the same as getting a cat to drink milk; so before long Masha got me where he wanted me. You see, it was a plan of his to coax me into this foolhardiness. He had a grudge against me, he did, and he wanted to get even. That is why he talked me into it; and I, like a newborn babe, never suspected.

"It all started because of my daughter. Danka was her name. She was a good daughter, and I was good to her, too. Never did I beat her. Every fair, whenever we did some good business, I would give her a gift—a ribbon, or a red kerchief. She would put it on her raven hair, and good she would be to look at. Even if I, her father, say so. She would look right in any gypsy's wagon.

"Some time before this foolishness I am telling you about I thought it was time for her to marry. She was fifteen already; so I looked around for a suitable husband. That same Masha had been strutting around her like a rooster about a hen, and he looked to me like a good match. Little I knew what he would turn out to be! So, one market day, his father and myself fell to talking about it, and we settled it all. We fixed the price—he could haggle, could that Mane—and we fixed the date, too. It was to be after the big fair in

Novi Sad, on the feast of St. Nicholas. We were at an inn at the time, and we call those two in.

"There," I said to Danka. "My friend Mane and myself have decided that you will marry his son Masha next autumn. Go and kiss the hand of your new father, and thank him for the honor."

"She just stands there, pale all of a sudden, and saying nothing. I thought she was shy."

"Come on!" I said. "Won't you do as your father says?"

"She mumbles something, kisses our hands, and walks out. Never does she look at Masha, who stands there grinning from ear to ear.

"That night Danka says to me:

"Father, I have been always a good daughter to you, haven't I?"

"Yes," I say, "you have, and that is why I shall give you fifty ducats when you marry Masha."

"Father," she tells me quietly, "I won't marry Masha."

"I was turned to stone.

"Did I hear right?" I ask. "You won't marry Masha, did you say?"

"Yes, that is what I said—I won't marry him," she answers, cool as ice.

"Do you know that I have given my word, and that we have drunk a glass upon it? You will marry him," I say, beginning to get angry.

"You gave your word, but I did not give mine," she says, the impudent wench, right to my face!

"I was so angry that I struck her. My ring cut her cheek, and the blood was flowing, but she never moves—just stands there like a rock, looking at me with those eyes of hers like two coals in the fire.

"You shall marry him, and that is all!" I shout.

"Then I call Yula—that was her mother, she was a good wife. She died the year of the flood.

"There is your daughter," I say. "You've brought her up wrong. Is this the way she obeys the word of her father? You talk to her and tell her she has got to marry Masha Blacksmith on the feast of St. Nicholas."

"For a few days Danka sits in the wagon and about the fire, never saying a word, but just looking at me queerly sometimes. Then one morning there was no Danka. She had run away with Milun

Cimbalist. I was mad, let me tell you. I wanted to find her and kill her; but they went away into other countries, he playing his cimbalon, and never did I see her until she came back with a son. What a boy that little fellow was! He looked like his grandfather.

"Mane was angry when he heard about Danka's elopement, and we quarreled. I guess we were heard all over the country, the way we shouted at each other. They kept us in jail a week, for making so much noise—disturbing the public peace, the government said.

"Masha never says a word about it. Always he was nice to me, the same as before. Then he started talking about those horses of the Yankovici. I thought he had forgotten all about Danka, and never did I dream what he was preparing for me. Anyhow, as I said, what with Efrem this and Efrem that, he got me into it.

"We needed one more man, so we picked Yotza Violinist. Now he was what I call the right kind of a gypsy. He was all right in every way. Everywhere he went with his violin—Budapest, Belgrade, Vienna, Paris, and where else didn't he go? Hey, how that man could play! Your heart ached, that is all. He got everything he wanted from the people when he played for them. They cried when they listened to him. A real gypsy he was; but then one day he played for a rich Russian duke. He played for him three days. The duke just drank and Yetza played, and they say the duke would cry like a child and ask him to play some more. Well, at last the duke got drunk, and then he says to that same Yotza:

"'Yotza, *bachushka*, you are an angel! Your music is like balsam on my wounded heart, and you have solaced me as could no one else in my great pain; but never will I let you do it for anybody else.'

"Then he takes his saber and *flick*, he cuts off the fingers of Yotza's hand. Next he takes a wallet full of money, gives it to Yotza, pulls out his revolver, and *bang*, he shoots himself. He was a mad Russian duke, all right. In love he was, they say.

"Well, Yotza couldn't play any more, so he came home and took to horse trading. Sometimes he would cry. Cry he would for hours, as if he were crazy; and then he would ask other gypsies to play to him. After a while he would grow wild, and start drinking and throwing money

about, just like a drunken peasant. It was bad, for we gypsies never get drunk; but otherwise he was a good fellow, that same Yotza.

"Well, then, the three of us settled it all among ourselves. Masha went over the ground, and he tells us everything is safe. He says the horses are in a stable, and there is no one watching them. All we have to do is to get inside, lift the latch of the door, and lead the horses out. He made it look so easy, the devil's son! So we chose a moonless, rainy night, and off we went to steal those bays.

"Now, sir, if you would give me some more cigarettes I would be thankful, for my throat is getting dry," Topaz Efrem reminded me.

I gave him the whole package, anxious for him to go on.

"Yes, sir—it was a thing I shall never forget, that night; but again, the Lord be praised, it could have been worse. My wits saved me—that's what I ought to be thankful for. We gypsies are a wise people, you know. We can get out of scrapes like nobody else, and we can think straight and fast. Did you hear that story of how a gypsy saved the moon for the world? Of course you didn't.

"It was in America, where some foolish people had decided that they would shoot the moon down. They fixed a big gun, loaded it, and were taking aim at the moon, while a lot of people looked on, watching to see it fall down. Luckily there was a gypsy among them. He comes forward to those people by the guns, and, taking his hat off, he says:

"'Excuse me, sirs, no offense meant, but what do you want to do?'

"They looked at him from head to foot and answered:

"'Don't bother us. Don't you see we want to shoot the moon down? That's what we want to do.'

"The gypsy scratches his head and says:

"'It is none of my business what you are doing, sirs, and no offense meant, but did you think that there will be no moonlight when you shoot her down? How are people going to travel at night, I ask you, sirs? No offense meant.'

"The foolish Americans looked at one another and then at the gypsy.

"'By all the saints, this man is right! We never thought of that. We thank you,

sir. You have saved the moon for the world, and we won't forget it.'

"Ever since then no gypsy has to show a bill of sale when he sells a horse in that country. That is how clever we are.

"Sir, this night is getting cold. I wish I had a coat like that one of yours there! It would be just right for my rheumatism."

Topaz Efrem pointed to my raincoat, which lay on the ground.

"All right—I shall give it to you; but won't you tell me what happened when you tried to steal those horses?"

"I thank you, sir. I'll tell you right away. Well, there we go. We put Yotza to watch the house, and Masha and I went to the stable. With our knives we dug a hole in the mud wall, softly, not to wake anybody up. There was not much need for caution, because it was just the right kind of night for horse stealing. It was an autumn night, cold and raining thinly, and even the dogs were seeking shelter. Anyhow, there we go and dig that hole through the wall. When it was finished, who was to crawl into the stable and open the door?

"'You, Efrem, you are the older—you go in first,' whispers that same Masha, the rascal he was!

"In I go, the old fool I am! I was thinking about the bays, and my heart was beating hard. Slowly I crawl in. I had not even got to my feet when suddenly there were three lamps burning right in my eyes, and I see the three brothers grinning at me,

each with a nasty pitchfork in his hands. They had covered the lamps with their coats until I got in. It was all Masha's doing—he had let them know we were coming. He had lied to us, for one of the brothers always slept in the stable.

"Well, there I was, my knees sagging under me, and those three dragons of Yankovici smiling at me, thinking what they are going to do to me. I knew they would beat me. If they left me alive, I would not be much good for anything the rest of my life. They would make an example of me, they would.

"But then I got my wits together quick.

"'Can you tell me, please,' I say, taking my hat off politely, like a gentleman, 'if this is the right road to Titel?'

"They looked at one another in amazement, and in that moment my head was back in the hole. I wriggled like a fish, and was out almost before they knew what had happened. All I got was one bad blow on my foot, for they were in each other's way too much to hurt me more. I got away in the darkness, but my ankle was broken, and not the best medicine woman could fix it again. That is why they call me Topaz Efrem, Efrem the Lame.

"B-r-r-r! It's getting cold, and I am not as young as I used to be. I wish I had as good a shirt as you have!"

I said a somewhat hasty good night to Efrem, and left him, for I thought it was time to get away while I still retained my shirt.

THE MESSAGE

If it be true that restless souls may come
And speak to those their earth life held most dear;
If lips the grave shut in, cold, silent, dumb,
Can somehow frame a phrase for love to hear—
Then when the sun sinks low o'er western hill,
And all the world lies waiting, hushed and still,
Sometime, from somewhere, out beyond the blue
Of God's vast oversea, I'll speak to you.

If it be true that sometimes souls can bend,
And speed a wish to one who waits below;
Then shall I tell you, though our joy must end
I would not have you sad or lonely grow.
The sun that sets shall rise another morn,
The heart that loves can throb for love new born,
And I shall smile in heaven when I see
You thrill again as once you thrilled for me.

L. Mitchell Thornton

Diodotta of the Evil Eye

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A ROMANCE OF MODERN ROME—
THE STRANGE EXPERIENCES OF AN AMERICAN VISITOR
WHO SCORNFULLY REFUSED TO BELIEVE IN
THE AGE-OLD ITALIAN SUPERSTITIONS

By Frederic Arnold Kummer

THE two young men who were dining at the Colonna Restaurant were as different in appearance as two young men of the same age, dressed in evening clothes, could possibly be; yet in one respect they were alike—both were noticeably gay and care-free. The slender one, who ate his spaghetti so deftly and smoked cigarettes between courses, was the Chevalier Luigi Martoni, of Neapolitan blood, black-haired, dark-skinned, eager and graceful in movement, with dancing devils in his quick black eyes.

"So you laugh at our Italian superstitions, do you?" he exclaimed, sipping his Orvieto wine. "Well, my friend, all I can say is that you have much to learn."

Tony Gerard, wide of shoulder and chest, with the ruddy hair and cool gray eyes of the Nordic, grinned until his teeth flashed. A thoroughly sophisticated New Yorker, he utterly scorned such outworn things as ancient superstitions—or thought he did, which amounted to the same thing. He and the chevalier had been discussing some of the popular beliefs of the Roman peasantry, their barnyard magic, their quaint and curious traditions.

"You Italians are like a lot of children, Luigi," Tony said lightly. "Next thing you'll be asking me to believe in the evil eye."

"Well, why not?"

"Don't make me laugh!"

For a moment Martoni's quick eyes seemed to reflect the glow of his cigarette tip.

"I believe in it," he said. "I have met at least two persons who possessed it. I also know a woman right here in Rome

who can make me think of her whenever she wishes—witchcraft, one might say."

Tony Gerard laughed until the wine glasses on the table shook. There was such derision in his merriment that the chevalier's dark cheeks flushed with a still darker tint.

"Childish nonsense! Food for babes!" Gerard chuckled. "Luigi, I'm positively ashamed of you—an intelligent man of the world believing in such rot!"

The Chevalier Martoni turned to speak to the waiter about the wine.

"Concerning facts," he resumed lightly, "it is useless to argue. One can be convinced only by experience. An Australian bushman, no doubt, would deny the possibility of an airplane until he actually saw one."

"So you compare me, intellectually, with an Australian bushman, do you? Complimentary, I must say!"

"Only in your lack of knowledge of magic, my dear fellow. Otherwise I am convinced you have a fairly good brain. I am ordering a sparkling wine which I think you will declare the equal of any you have ever tasted. I still, you observe, have confidence in your judgment of wines."

He smiled over his glass, only to discover that his companion was paying no attention to him. Instead, Gerard was staring fixedly at a woman and two men who had just seated themselves at a near-by table. It would perhaps be more correct to say that he was staring at the woman.

She was youthful, alluringly slender, and of unusual if somewhat tragic beauty. In spite of the grace of her figure, the ex-

quisite modeling of her features, and the warm pallor of her cheeks, Tony Gerard found himself particularly attracted by her eyes. Large, rather prominent, in color an amber green, they suggested the eyes of some princess of the Nile, smoldering into flame as she condemned her lover of the night before to the waiting crocodiles.

So fascinated was Tony that he stared overlong, not noticing that the woman's two escorts were frowning. The Chevalier Martoni bowed to the group, then leaned across the table and touched his companion upon the arm.

"You are not often rude, Tony, my friend," he whispered.

Tony Gerard shivered back to his seat.

"Amazing-looking woman!" he said sheepishly. "Do you know her?"

"Yes, I do."

"Who is she?"

"Her name is Diodotta d'Este, daughter of Count Leonardo d'Este. That's her father with her—the slender old man with the face like a dead pope. The middle-aged gentleman who suggests a prize fighter is Pietro Raffo, one of the richest and most heartily disliked men in Rome—a banker who has made a fortune by lending money to needy borrowers at usurious rates of interest. The difference between a banker and a pawnbroker, one might observe, is that the pawnbroker assumes a certain risk, the banker none at all. Still"—he shrugged his shoulders expressively—"you perceive that he dines with the Count d'Este and his charming daughter, whom, I am informed, her father would be pleased to marry off to so rich a suitor."

"Beautiful!" Tony remarked reflectively. "Astonishingly beautiful! Never before have I seen such eyes—such tragic eyes. One might suppose the girl had never known a happy day in her life. Look here, Luigi, I want to meet that woman. Since you know her, why not present me?"

The Chevalier Martoni's gaze rested for a long moment upon Diodotta d'Este's face. When he finally turned to his companion, there was a suggestion of sadness in his eyes.

"No." He shook his head. "I could not do that."

"Why not, Luigi?" Tony Gerard gave his friend a questioning stare. "Nothing strange, is there, about wanting to meet a charming woman?"

The shadows in Martoni's eyes deepened.

"I can't do it, Tony," he whispered. "I wish you wouldn't ask me why."

"What? Look here, old man, don't be so confoundedly mysterious! Am I a social outcast, or anything like that, to be refused an ordinary introduction?"

"Just a moment, Tony," replied the chevalier. "It isn't that. It isn't on your account that I beg to be excused. You are all right; but the lady—"

He hesitated, stopped. Tony stared in amazement.

"The lady! I don't understand."

"I know you don't," said Martoni. "That's the trouble; but I think you remarked, a moment ago, that she has tragic eyes. Others before you have observed that fact. Were you not a close friend of mine, I should hesitate to speak of it. Do you happen to recollect the topic we were discussing a few moments ago?"

"Certainly. We were speaking of superstitions—witchcraft—the evil eye."

"Yes, we were. Well—"

"Well, what?" Tony asked belligerently, as the chevalier paused.

Luigi Martoni raised his sleek shoulders a scant inch, but there was a world of meaning in the gesture.

"Poor Diodotta!" he whispered. "She is one of those unfortunates to whom I referred. She has the evil eye."

"Nonsense!"

"Strange as it may seem, my dear Tony, it isn't nonsense at all. I speak only of what I know. I am very fond of Diodotta d'Este. I am equally fond of you; and I do not wish to bring either of you any harm."

"Look here, Luigi, are you trying to kid me?"

"Assuredly not. To kid, as you Americans so charmingly put it, is not one of my accomplishments. I have a keen regard for the truth. Perhaps I should not have said what I did about Diodotta, for it is not a pleasant thing to say about a woman. I may have gone too far; but since I have gone so far, it is necessary that I should go farther, and tell you the rest of her story—on condition, of course, that you will regard it as absolutely confidential. Should you repeat what I am about to tell you, it would break her heart."

"I never repeat things, Luigi—especially things about women. You know that."

"Yes, I know it. That is why I have been so very frank. Diodotta d'Este is a

woman of twenty-four. You have remarked the tragedy in her eyes. I shall now acquaint you with its cause. Her father, of course, is of the nobility, the possessor of an ancient name; but he has very little money. What more natural than that he should hope to restore the family fortunes by having Diodotta make an advantageous marriage? Here in Italy such things are arranged. Well, to make a long story short, at sixteen Diodotta became engaged to a young man in the diplomatic service—a man of wealth and position. A few days after the engagement had been announced, he was killed in the hunting field."

"Well?" Tony asked. "What of it? Any man may break his neck, especially if he doesn't know how to ride. Why blame the girl?"

"Wait! What I have told you is only the beginning. No one paid any attention to the matter at the time, of course, except to regard it as an unfortunate accident; but two years later Diodotta was again sought in marriage—this time by a rich young man from the Argentine. Everything was progressing splendidly when he conceived the idea of doing some mountain climbing. I need scarcely tell you the rest. A slip, a hidden crevasse, a rope severed by the ice—and he was never seen again."

"The devil you say!" Tony Gerard's eyes widened for a moment, but he recovered. "A coincidence, of course."

"Precisely. That is what the poor girl's friends all told her. She might have believed it, but for the third—"

"You mean to say there was a third?"

"I do—a man from Turin, in the automobile business. His engagement to Diodotta was made public at a dinner given by the count at his charming old home near the Piazza Navona. Diodotta's fiancé drove away about midnight, in his high-powered car, toward Turin. A kinsman's country house in the Alban Hills; but he never reached it. There had been a great deal of wine drunk, and the man was noted as a speed demon. He drove sixty miles an hour—into the stone abutment of a bridge. The rest you can imagine. Since then Diodotta has not been engaged."

Tony Gerard slowly drank his glass of sparkling wine, but did not speak.

"Of course," the chevalier went on with a faint smile, "there are persons like you, who do not believe in superstitions, who

laugh at such things as the evil eye, who would explain the whole affair as a mere coincidence. Personally I am not of those. I believe what I believe. Now, my dear Tony, if you still wish it, I shall be most happy to present you to the count and his daughter; but never say I did not warn you—and never, of course, mention a word of this to her. The poor girl, as you can readily understand, is extremely sensitive. These tragedies have affected her deeply. She goes out very little. I am surprised to see her here to-night. Well, since you have finished your coffee, I will order some brandy, to cheer you up. We can stop at the count's table on the way out. Knowing as I do your contempt for our childish Italian superstitions, I am sure you will not feel the least hesitation—"

Tony met his friend's gaze steadily, but his composure was just a trifle shaken.

"Are you lying to me, Luigi?" he asked. The chevalier raised his hand.

"To what end?" he inquired. "You take no stock in superstitions, therefore I could not hope to alarm you. I am not at all eager to introduce you to Diodotta d'Este. I have already told you that I would prefer not to do so; therefore I can see no point whatever in your suggestion that I am not telling you the truth. Shall we go?"

Tony Gerard glanced quickly at the girl who had been the object of their discussion. She sat silent, unsmiling, taking no part in the conversation of her companions. When Signor Raffo addressed her, offering her some wine, she merely shook her head and turned away. It thus happened that her eyes met Tony's, and it seemed to him that within their depths he sensed a tragic appeal—a cry for help. He tossed his napkin on the table.

"I shall consider it a privilege, Luigi," he said, rising, "to make the Signorina d'Este's acquaintance."

II

TONY GERARD seemed in a hurry as he left his hotel that morning. He glanced about so furtively that Mrs. Van Ness, who was waiting for her automobile, could not help noticing it.

"What on earth has come over Tony, Celeste?" she asked, turning to the tall, blond girl at her side.

"Goodness knows, mother! I think Luigi Martoni knows, too, but you can't

get a word out of him, except that a couple of weeks ago Tony met an Italian girl named Diodotta something or other—her father's a count, I believe—and since then he's been more or less crazy."

"Crazy about the girl, do you mean?" Mrs. Van Ness asked, a certain frigidity in her voice; for at one time she had rather fancied Tony, who was well off and otherwise eligible, for Celeste.

"No, I don't mean that—although he may be. She's very good-looking, I hear, if you care for the Italian type. I mean that Tony is just plain, ordinary dippy. He seems to be having an attack of nerves. Look at him now, will you?"

Young Gerard was making his way across the crowded street in the manner of a timid and hesitating old woman. As a roaring Fiat passed near him, he leaped a good five feet. A painter, at work on the front of a building across the way, called down with characteristic Italian vehemence a warning to those below to avoid the drip of his brush. On hearing his voice, Tony executed another wild dive without looking up. As a passing taxicab backfired with a pistol-like report, he leaned weakly against a lamp-post. Then, seeing the smiles of the passers-by, he squared his shoulders angrily and stalked off down the street.

"Our friend Tony Gerard seems a little nervous this morning," murmured a soft Italian voice at Celeste's elbow.

"Luigi!" Miss Van Ness whirled swiftly about. "What's happened to him, anyway? A man who has been decorated for flying in France, who has shot elephants and tigers in Cambodia, who only last summer saved two women's lives in the surf at Southampton, to be jumping about like a scared rabbit! What's the matter with him, Luigi? Do you know?"

"Only what he has told me," the chevalier replied, smiling his delightful but always baffling smile.

"And what has he told you?"

"Well, perhaps not much; but enough to convince me that he is undergoing a very severe strain. Some queer fate seems to be pointing a finger at him."

"I don't understand you, Luigi," Celeste said.

"Fate," the chevalier went on. "Or, it may be—magic."

"Magic! Don't talk nonsense! There isn't any such thing."

"So Tony said. He doesn't believe in it; but from what he told me at lunch yesterday, I fear he is beginning to weaken a little. It is really a most curious affair, is it not?"

"What is? Don't be so mysterious!"

"The thing that is happening to him, of course. As you may possibly have heard, he seems to have become interested in a young Italian girl—a member of the old nobility. It was my misfortune to present him to her, some two weeks ago. Since then, it appears, he has been the victim of a singular series of accidents—of escapes, I should perhaps say more correctly. He described some of them to me at luncheon yesterday. They have made him extremely nervous."

"What sort of escapes, Luigi? You're terribly vague!"

"I will try to be more explicit. He has undergone a number of experiences, none of them serious, perhaps, but still—disturbing." The chevalier tapped his eyeglasses thoughtfully against his carefully manicured nails. "Perhaps one should regard them as mere coincidences; but they have succeeded, it seems, in doing what you call in your most expressive language, 'getting his goat.' For example, a day or two after his meeting with the young woman in question, he went to call on her. Shortly after leaving her house he was very nearly run down by an automobile. But for the skill of the driver—a young army officer, I hear—he would surely have been killed."

"But, Luigi, don't try to tell me a thing like that would upset Tony Gerard. It's silly!"

"Not the one thing, certainly; but the very next day, as he was passing along the street upon which Count d'Este's house is situated, a careless workman, repairing the front of a near-by building, allowed a heavy stone to fall from his scaffold. It crashed to the ground not a yard behind our friend Tony's back. Had he been one second later, it would have killed him."

"But even that—"

The chevalier looked at her gravely.

"There is more. I put him up, you will remember, at my club. The other day, while dining there, the waiter rushed to the table just as he was about to consume his oysters, and snatched the plate away, whispering that one of the cooks, who had tasted the oysters an hour before, had just

been taken to the hospital suffering from ptomaine poisoning. I dislike, naturally, to relate such a story about my club, but—these things will happen, in spite of every precaution."

Celeste puckered her eyes into a doubting frown.

"In spite of all you tell me," she said, "it isn't like Tony."

"There were other occurrences, of course—a number of them," the chevalier went on. "I do not remember them all. One in particular, however, stands out. I myself took Tony to a little wine shop in the Piazza del Teatro Valle the other day. He had expressed a wish to taste some of our local wines. Scarcely had we seated ourselves when a drunken fellow, a workman of some sort, came in with a very pretty girl and selected a table near us. Tony glanced at the girl, as any one might, whereupon her companion took offense, and, claiming that Tony had attempted to flirt with her, proceeded to make for him with a knife. But for the quickness of the proprietor, our friend would have been seriously injured—killed, perhaps. He tried to go after the fellow, of course, but I managed to hold him back until the man had been put out of the place.

"During the past two weeks there have been frequent incidents of a similar nature. A drunken taxicab driver almost ran him into the Tiber. Footpads have followed him at night. He has been mysteriously fired upon from dark corners. Daily warnings reach him by post. As a result of these occurrences, he has gone about in a state of constant apprehension. Life seems a perilous adventure. I don't wonder his nerves are shaken. I should be nervous, too, under similar circumstances; but then, being a very superstitious person myself, I suppose I should call it witchcraft."

"I don't believe you'd do anything of the sort," replied Celeste. "You'd be much more likely to blame it on one of your Italian secret societies; but I can't see why any one should want to make trouble for Tony."

"My dear young friend from America," the chevalier remarked gravely, "the only reason I can assign for Tony's misfortunes is one which I am not at liberty to divulge; but this much I will say, in spite of the fact that Shakespeare said it before me—'There are more things in heaven and

earth, *Horatio*, than are dreamed of in your philosophy.'"

"I think you are talking a lot of nonsense," Celeste objected.

The chevalier shrugged his graceful shoulders.

"In Italy, Miss Van Ness," he said, "we are less practical than in your great country. We are perhaps more pagan. We have beliefs, customs, superstitions, that go back to very ancient times. One sees them everywhere, particularly among our peasantry. Who can say what is true and what is false? I have known a woman to make a little wax figure of her rival, pierce its heart with a needle, and wait for the other woman to die. Sometimes she does. Absurd, perhaps"—he shrugged again—"but there are many who do not think so. Ah, here is your car! I sincerely hope that my little dissertation on magic has not bored you."

"I don't believe in it, Luigi," Celeste laughed, "no matter what you say. It would take more than witchcraft to scare Tony. It isn't like him to be afraid. Come and have luncheon with us, won't you?"

"Sorry!" The chevalier shook his head. "I have some matters to attend to which may not be denied, even for the very great pleasure of your charming company. *A rivederci!*"

He raised his hat, gave Celeste and her mother a gay smile, and was gone.

There was a very warm light in Celeste Van Ness's eyes as they followed him down the street.

"Isn't the chevalier a darling, mother?" she smiled. "We must ask him to dinner!"

III

It was singularly beautiful in the garden of the Count d'Este's house that night, but it must be admitted that much of the beauty of the place was due to the moon. Crumbling fountains, dilapidated vases, untrimmed shrubbery, paths overgrown with weeds, may cry loudly of poverty in the sunshine, but moonlight is more kind. Wrapped in its tender mantle even broken things become beautiful—the more so, perhaps, because they are broken.

Diodotta was seated on an ancient marble bench against the wall. Beside her was Tony, gazing at the girl's white loveliness. Presently he sighed. It was an audible sigh, and Diodotta noticed it.

"What is the matter with you, Tony, my friend?" she asked, a dancing smile in her eyes. "Has your afternoon in the hills proved fatiguing?"

To Tony the remark was annoying. It irked him beyond measure to have any one suggest that a stroll of a few miles through the country could possibly fatigue him—a man whose boast it was that he always kept himself fit. More than Diodotta's spoken words had caused his annoyance, for he had detected in her voice a note of irony which reminded him of an incident—a rather unfortunate incident. His thoughts went back to it.

They had walked for several miles through the hill country beyond Tivoli, before coming back to their automobile for an impromptu tea. The meal over, Diodotta perched herself upon a rock near the roadside, and, with the aid of a small gold and enamel compact taken from her purse, was engaged in restoring the distracting curves of her lips. From the far edge of the rock on which she sat a steep, almost perpendicular cliff stretched down—a weed-grown face of broken rock, with ragged little bushes growing here and there in earth-filled crevices, and a most disagreeable array of jagged boulders lurking at its base.

Tony stood gazing across the valley. To watch the girl at her toilette seemed somehow indelicate. Presently he heard a gentle tinkle, followed by an outcry of dismay. He turned just in time to see the little golden box disappear over the edge of the precipice.

Diodotta, on her knees, stretched out her head and looked down. Tony, watching her, thought the curves of her neck ravishing.

"There it is!" she exclaimed joyfully. "It's on that little ledge. Oh, *Tonio mio*, hurry and get it for me!"

Tony, in plus fours, also glanced over the cliff edge, supporting himself against a fragment of rock. The compact had fallen to a crumbling shelf some six or seven feet below—a shelf perhaps twelve inches wide, but to Tony's gaze it seemed scarce the width of his hand. The tiny golden object lay there in the sunlight, winking up at him like some huge, malicious eye.

"Get it for me!" Diodotta repeated in her most pleading voice.

There was no escaping her request. Just

how to manage it he did not know, but the fact remained—recover that golden box he must, or be forever shamed in the eyes of Diodotta d'Este. The condition to which his nerves had been reduced by the events of the past two weeks caused a faint shudder of apprehension to pass over him, and Diodotta noticed it. Not only did she notice it, but she fixed him with a contemptuous eye.

"Perhaps you would like me to call Bepo," she suggested frigidly. The car which had brought them from the city stood a scant fifty yards away. "I'm sure he will be only too glad—"

"Nonsense!" Tony growled, and shook himself, his face very red. "I'll get the thing, of course!"

He hated himself for his momentary hesitation. For an instant he almost hated Diodotta, thinking that she might have understood; but her eyes were calm, cool, inquiring, with what seemed like mocking shadows in their lucent depths—mocking, even cruel, he thought for a moment. The evil eye, Luigi Martoni had said. Then, ashamed, he put the thought from him and began to lower himself over the edge of the cliff.

It was not so difficult as he had feared—to get down, at least. A little dwarfed oak, no bigger than his wrist, afforded a handhold as he lowered himself to the ledge. Very carefully he bent over, and, picking up the compact, dropped it into his pocket. Diodotta, above, cheered him on gleefully, clapping her small hands, and apparently showing no appreciation of his danger.

Was she quite heartless, Tony wondered, as he sought to extricate himself from his perilous position? Or did she imagine that to stand thus on a narrow ledge of rock which might give way at any moment and precipitate him to his doom was not a matter to be taken seriously?

Already he could feel the ledge beginning to crumble beneath him. He reached up and seized the trunk of the tiny oak, just as the rock that had given him a foothold slid into the ravine below. Except by pulling himself back to safety against the tree's meager strength there was no way in which he could hope to regain the cliff edge—unless, of course, Bepo were sent for, to haul him up by main force.

"Never!" Tony muttered.

He began to pull, setting his feet against

some almost imperceptible ridges in the rock. Diodotta still seemed unaware of his danger. The roots of the little oak tree groaned and snapped, but did not give way until Tony, with a mighty heave, had managed to hurl the upper part of himself, at least, to a position of safety above the cliff edge.

The rest was easy. Scrambling to his knees, he rolled over on his back and lay staring up at the warm Italian sky. Admittedly he had been frightened, though he had faced charging elephants without a quiver. Nerves, of course! That damned Luigi Martoni and his tales!

Diodotta sat on her rock, gazing at him without warmth. Why was he lying there so stupidly? One of her countrymen would long ago have presented the compact to her with a flourish.

"You seem quite exhausted," she remarked presently, as she met Tony's eye. "I have some smelling salts—"

"Damn!" he muttered, and, sitting up, lit a cigarette.

Not until then did he trouble to take the little gold box from his pocket. He was angry with Diodotta and even more angry with himself. After what had happened to her three former sweethearts, one might have expected at least a *little* emotion on her part!

"I thank you," she said, very austere. "It was not of value sufficient for you to endanger your life."

Tony stared into her amber-green eyes, wondering whether she was laughing at him; but he detected no gleam of humor in them. Amazing eyes, he reflected—brilliant, luminous, yet revealing no suggestion whatever of the emotions behind them. They were like jewels backed by impenetrable shadows; yet they made him long to take her in his arms and crush her with kisses.

He remembered that Luigi had said her former sweethearts had all declared their love, before—before fate had overtaken them. Was that why he had been spared up to now? Well, he loved her enough to go through with it, whatever happened. He would ask her at this very moment!

"Diodotta—" he began, annoyed that his voice seemed so lacking in fire.

She rose with swift grace, and Tony saw that Beppo was approaching to gather up the tea things and replace the hamper in the car. Diodotta must have signaled the

chauffeur, although Tony had not seen her do it.

"We must go back, I think," she said sweetly, and went toward the car.

Tony followed in silence. There would be other opportunities, he reflected. The count had invited him to dine.

IV

At dinner, however, there was present the uncompromising figure of Pietro Raffo. He stared at Tony in wooden silence as he devoured his chicken and broccoli and gulped down his wine. To make conversation, Tony gave a humorous description of his adventure of the afternoon, adding, as an afterthought, that he was afraid he would never make a mountain climber.

No sooner had the words left his lips than he found himself gasping. One of Diodotta's sweethearts, he suddenly remembered, had perished while engaged in that very sport.

Signor Raffo's stare became humorous, malignant.

"One must have nerves of steel to attempt it," he remarked, giving Diodotta an admiring smile. "If, as you say, your nature is inclined to be timorous," he went on, addressing Tony, "take my advice and—"

"I didn't say my nature was timorous!" Tony interrupted hotly. "What I told you about—about this afternoon was intended to be funny—amusing."

"Yes? I confess it did not strike me so. I rather gained the impression that you felt you had had a very narrow escape. I am happy to learn that I was wrong. In the service of the ladies, one must never show the white feather."

The man was laughing at him, Tony well knew—laughing at him and trying to disparage him before Diodotta. Luigi Martoni had told him that Raffo wanted to marry her, in spite of her tragic past. He, at least, was not lacking in courage.

"If I loved a woman," Tony said gravely, "I would dare anything to win her—anything."

He hoped that all present would understand the significance of his remark. Signor Raffo, however, only laughed a peculiar, unpleasant laugh.

"One says such things, yes," he remarked, and changed the subject.

Shortly after dinner he had hurried away, pleading a political engagement, and

Tony and Diodotta had come out into the garden. Now they were sitting upon the ancient bench against the wall, with only the moonlight and a palpitating silence between them.

Tony declined to answer Diodotta's remark to the effect that his afternoon in the hills had proved fatiguing. He was thinking of other things, far more personal in their nature. There had been a note of defiance in the words of Pietro Raffo that could not be ignored, especially by a man as deeply, as desperately in love as was Tony.

"Diodotta," he whispered, moving closer to her and taking one of her hands, "I love you!"

As if in response to his words, a marble urn that decorated the wall above them toppled slowly from its base and fell to the ground with a crash. Diodotta sprang to her feet in alarm, but Tony refused to be disconcerted. He swept her into his arms.

"I love you!" he went on desperately. "I don't care if the wall, the whole confounded house, falls on me—I love you! In spite of all the superstitions in the world, I love you! Diodotta, will you marry me?"

She looked up at him, her face very pale in the moonlight, her eyes ablaze with green and gold fires.

"Of course I will, *Tonio mio*," she whispered. "I've been waiting for you to ask me; but when you speak of superstitions—"

Tony stopped her remarks on that score with kisses. He blamed himself bitterly for having mentioned the matter at all. Away with Luigi Martoni's talk of spells, of magic! The only magic that counted with him now was the magic of Diodotta's slender body, held so close and warm within his arms—the only spell the golden one she had woven about him with her smiles.

It took him the better part of an hour to tell her how deeply he loved her, and even then he felt that he had only made a beginning. At last Diodotta brought him back to earth.

"You must speak to my father, *Tonio mio*," she said; "but not to-night. It is late, and he has gone to bed. To-morrow—"

"To-morrow!" Tony murmured ecstatically, and fell to kissing her again.

In the end, Diodotta had to send him away.

"Come in the morning," she whispered. "My father always feels more cheerful then. I look to you to persuade him. Pietro Raffo, you understand, also wishes—"

"Hang Pietro Raffo!" Tony growled. "I'll be here at dawn, if you say so!"

He left her and went down the street, whistling gayly. Superstitions! Evil eyes! Childish nonsense! Love was the only thing in life.

At the corner a menacing figure detached itself from the shadows, with other figures behind it, but Tony saw nothing. His head was in the clouds. Thus it happened that an arm slid about his neck and choked him to silence before he could utter a sound. Ropes twined themselves suddenly about his arms and legs. Swathing bands enveloped his mouth, his eyes. He felt himself being lifted and flung upon springy cushions.

Then motion, smooth, silent, swift. Tony strained at his bonds and groaned. Italy, he admitted, was certainly an astonishing place.

V

It was perhaps unkind of the Chevalier Luigi Martoni to tell his little joke upon Tony Gerard at the club that afternoon; but Luigi argued that good jokes, like good wines, are the better when shared with one's friends. Hence it happened that after an excellent luncheon the chevalier recounted to a group of intimates the efforts he had made to convince a skeptical American, who boasted of his contempt for superstitions, that such things are not to be laughed at.

One of the group, Gaspare Previtali, the dramatist, knew of the affair already, for it had been his skill at the wheel of an automobile that had enabled him to put the fear of death in Tony's heart by missing him by the breadth of a hand. The waiter, too, who had so suddenly removed the oysters, knew something about it, although his information had not extended beyond the chevalier's generous tip. Small matters such as pieces of stone falling from scaffolds were easily arranged, as well as altercations with supposedly drunken chauffeurs in unfrequented wine shops.

There had been other such bits of folly—taxicab accidents—shots from ambush—the chevalier recounted his list of drolleries amid peals of laughter. His friend from America, he said, did not be-

lieve in the evil eye, and called it nonsense. He had met such and such a young woman—the chevalier named no names—who was said to possess it, and whose lovers all met tragic deaths because of it. The chain of events which followed had been arranged solely for the purpose of testing the American's nerve.

That very night an urn was to be toppled over. There were other plans afoot. A most amusing comedy, the chevalier asserted. He meant to keep it up until his victim admitted that there might be something in superstitions, after all. Then he would tell him the truth.

Luigi's droll tale convulsed his hearers. He was particular to ask them not to speak of the matter until the jest had been fully played out.

Tony, meanwhile, being driven blindfolded through the night, in an unknown automobile, toward an equally unknown destination, was wondering what reason any one could have for making off with him in this fashion. He had no enemies in Rome, so far as he knew. His wealth, while considerable, had not been publicly advertised. He traveled inconspicuously, as any gentleman should, with nothing to distinguish him from the thousands of other Americans who visited Rome yearly. It seemed unlikely that he would be selected as one to be held for ransom.

There was Luigi Martoni's story, of course—that Diodotta d'Este was cursed with the evil eye; but in spite of falling stonework and drunken taxicab drivers—even in spite of what the chevalier had told him concerning the girl's tragic past—Tony sturdily refused to admit a belief in the supernatural.

It was true that he had experienced a moment of weakness that afternoon, while recovering Diodotta's vanity box, but he was heartily ashamed of it now. Diodotta, who an hour before had put her arms about his neck and kissed him—Diodotta, the woman he loved better than anything in life, to bring misfortune upon him! The idea was preposterous. He was in the hands, no doubt, of criminals, who had in some way learned of his wealth.

His involuntary drive was a long one. After a time the jolting of the car indicated that it had left the main highway they had been traveling for some rougher road among the hills. There were persons near him, for he could hear them moving

about on the seat ahead, but they did not speak. The entire journey, so far as Tony was concerned, was passed in darkness and silence.

After what seemed hours, the jolting motion of the car ceased, and it glided to a smooth and sudden stop. Then the door opened, and searching hands grasped him and lifted him from the seat. He heard the grind of hob-nailed boots on stone flagging as he was carried through the open air for a considerable distance, after which came a steep descent into an atmosphere of dampness and mold. The smell of old masonry and decaying mortar and the pungent odor of wine assailed his nostrils. He felt himself being placed in a chair. Then the bands over his mouth and eyes were removed, and he gazed, blinking, about him.

He was seated in a large room floored, walled, and vaulted with stone. A candle, burning on a long table beside him, provided feeble illumination. Beyond it stood a man, short in stature and heavily built, whose features were masked in a peculiar manner. Instead of the conventional strip of black across his eyes, a gay-colored handkerchief had been tied tightly about his head beneath them, its folds hanging loose beyond his chin. Nothing of his countenance was visible, except his forehead, which was partly covered by a cap, and two very penetrating black eyes. He wore the velveteen jacket and breeches of the Italian countryman, and held a bright-bladed hunting knife in his hand.

Stepping briskly forward, he swept his knife through the ropes which had been wound about Tony's legs. Then, having kicked the fragments aside, he passed behind the chair, and in a similar manner severed the cords binding the prisoner's wrists.

"Now, *signore*," he said in a pleasant voice, "you will be more comfortable, I assure you!"

Realizing that he was free, Tony sprang to his feet. The man with the knife was still behind him—the door, partly open, lay ahead. He ran toward it, but stopped. The light in the corridor outside, while faint, was sufficient to reveal the presence of additional guards.

As he hesitated, the man behind him laughed an amused but by no means disagreeable laugh.

"Quite out of the question, *signore*," he

said. "We cannot allow you to leave us in that way."

"Why the devil am I here at all?" Tony demanded, furious, yet striving to keep his temper. "What do you want with me?"

The man folded his clasp knife and dropped it carelessly into his pocket.

"Very little, *signore*," he said, "beyond the pleasure of your company. No harm is intended, I assure you. We look upon you as an honored guest. Your room, as you perceive, is a spacious one. You will be not uncomfortably lodged. Against the wall is a bed—not elaborate, but sufficient for any man's needs. As is usual in country districts, hotel conveniences are lacking, but there is a wash bowl, with soap and towels. Also there are some books—in Italian, of course, but that does not matter, since I am informed that you both read and speak our language like a native. It is a most unusual accomplishment, *signore*, in an American, and one upon which I compliment you. As for food, it will be furnished at the customary hours—coarse food, perhaps, but by no means unpalatable. Our peasant cooks have a way with them. In fact, I venture to predict that you will enjoy it. Our only regret is that your apartment, having been designed originally as a wine cellar, contains no windows, thus depriving you of a view of the charming country hereabouts. Ventilation, however, is provided by the row of small openings you see along the outer wall, just beneath the ceiling. If you can suggest anything else that will add to your comfort—"

"Damn my comfort!" Tony exclaimed, now thoroughly enraged. "I don't want comfort! I don't want anything here! I want to get out!"

The stocky man seated himself on the edge of the table. While his mouth was hidden by the handkerchief that hung over it, certain tiny crinkles about the corners of his eyes betrayed the fact that he was smiling.

"Nothing, *signore*, could be simpler," he remarked softly, tapping well polished nails upon the table top. "To obtain your liberty, all you need do is to agree to leave Italy at once."

"Agree to leave Italy at once!" Tony roared, shaking with anger. "Why the devil should I?"

"Why not? You had planned but a short visit to Rome. Paris, I am sure,

would prove much more delightful, and healthier, perhaps, at this season of the year. We wish you to go away and stay away."

"I won't do it!"

The stocky man shrugged his shoulders.

"Then you will remain here," he said. For several moments the two faced each other, silent. Then Tony spoke.

"Suppose I do agree to leave Italy," he said sullenly. "What then? What's to prevent me from returning the next day? You don't suppose I'd feel in honor bound to keep a promise made under such conditions, do you?"

"No, *signore*, I do not suppose that. When you inform me that you are ready to leave Italy, I shall make it my business to see that you keep your word. We are not, you understand, in America. Our country is, one might say, less civilized—in certain respects, at least. If you wish to terminate your visit here, you will be pleasantly but somewhat slowly conveyed by boat to—let us say Alexandria. After a delightful cruise through the Mediterranean, you might perhaps be back in Rome within a month; but by that time it will make no difference."

Something in the man's final words confirmed a suspicion which had been growing in Tony's mind ever since the beginning of their talk—a suspicion involving Signor Raffo.

"Is your purpose in bringing me here," he asked steadily, "to make trouble between—between a certain lady and myself?"

The man across the table shrugged.

"Our purpose is to have you leave Italy," he said.

Just then Tony realized that no one, except Diodotta and himself, knew that he cared for her, or that he had asked her to be his wife. Doubtless Pietro Raffo, if he proved to be at the bottom of the present outrage, had argued that his American rival was not sufficiently interested in Diodotta to face a long and tiresome incarceration on her account. An affair of the moment, he had probably assumed—nothing really serious, especially in view of the girl's tragic past. Well, Tony reflected, gritting his teeth, Signor Raffo had made a very bad guess!

"I shall not leave Italy," he said, his gray eyes fixed on his companion's bright black ones. "The longer you keep me

here, the worse it will be for you. That's all I have to say—now."

The man got up from the table and moved toward the door.

"As you please, *signore*," he said. "Since you seem determined to make us a long visit, why not send to the hotel for your luggage? I am sure it will add greatly to your comfort to have toilet articles and a change of linen."

"I'll send for nothing!" Tony roared. "If you think you're going to keep me here, you're very much mistaken!"

The man pushed open the door without replying, and presently Tony heard the grind of the ancient and rusty lock. He threw himself on the bed and tried to think.

He was in a devil of a fix—there was no doubt about that. Diodotta waiting for him the next morning, to ask her father's consent to their engagement—their marriage! And he unable to appear, either tomorrow morning or any other morning in the near future, so far as he could see! It was nerve-racking!

She would think him a coward, of course, unwilling to face the future because of what had happened to her in the past. She would think that he had shown the white feather and run away. No doubt that was precisely what Pietro Raffo wished her to think. It was maddening!

Then consolation came. His friends in Rome would miss him, of course, and would try to find him—Luigi Martoni, Mrs. Van Ness, Celeste, and others. Search would be made; but to find a man spirited away as he had been, hidden in some remote place in the hills, might prove extremely difficult.

Raffo, he had been led to understand, possessed strong political influence. There were powerful secret organizations in Italy, the members of which stood by one another to the death. No doubt, should pursuit eventually lead in his direction, warning would be given in advance, whereupon he would be hurried away to some other and even more remote place of confinement; or he might be removed from Italy altogether, to return weeks later with a vague story of having been kidnaped, which no one would believe.

Meanwhile, the damage would have been done. Diodotta would have lost faith in him. Their love affair, so gloriously begun, would have come to an ignominious

end. As Tony reflected upon this aspect of the matter, he groaned.

Thank God he had not agreed to send to the hotel for his trunks! Had he done so, all would have been lost. Diodotta, the authorities, every one would conclude at once that he had left voluntarily—had fled, like some weakling afraid to face his fate. His unoccupied room at the hotel, his trunks and bags, would at least serve to give notice to the world that he had not left voluntarily.

Somewhat comforted by these reflections, he went to bed.

VI

DIODOTTA D'ESTE, waking on what she felt was the very happiest day of her life, sang so joyously as she dressed that her father, passing the door of her room, looked in to ask the reason for her sudden gay spirits. Diodotta had not been over happy of late, and the count, whose old eyes were still keen, had not failed to notice it.

"*Buon giorno, carissima*," he said, smiling upon her in his quaintly benevolent way. "You are as brilliant as the sunshine. What, may I ask, is the cause?"

He waited, remembering that she and Tony Gerard had spent the evening in the moonlit garden. The count was a man of lively imagination, in spite of his apparent detachment from life.

Diodotta went up to him, her amber-green eyes shining.

"My Tonio loves me," she whispered, bright color in her cheeks. "He is to speak to you this morning."

The count put his arm about Diodotta's waist and kissed her. He was very fond of his daughter; but there was a frown about his eyes, nevertheless.

"You know, *figlia mia*," he murmured, "that Signor Raffo—"

"That old windbag!" Diodotta exclaimed. "You'd never ask me to marry him?"

"But, my child, he is so rich—so very rich!" There was a certain pathos in the count's voice, born of many years of noble poverty. "Our ancient name—"

"To be changed to that of Raffo?" Diodotta laughed, patting her father's cheek. "Oh, darling, you are so funny! How do you know that my Tonio is not rich, too?"

"Have you asked him?"

"Assuredly not! One does not ask such questions of a lover. To me it makes no

difference; but when he comes to you, I suppose he will tell you."

The count sighed. It had been his dream to see Diodotta married to Pietro Raffo and his millions. The banker was one of the wealthiest men in Rome. Over and over the count had told himself that if his daughter became Signora Raffo he would see the ancient glory of his family restored, and Diodotta living like a princess of the blood. She would find happiness in that. Being old, he forgot love. It is easy for age to forget it.

"They say all Americans are rich," he said in tones of resignation. "You love this Mr. Gerard very much?"

"I cannot live without him!"

Diodotta kissed the count's waxlike hand enthusiastically, as he pressed her to his side.

"And you would let him carry you off to America, and leave your poor old father—"

"Nothing of the sort!" Diodotta laughed up at him. "We will take you with us. You've always said you wanted to see the cloud-scraping buildings of New York, a hundred stories high, and the Statue of Liberty. It will be superb!"

"Well, we shall see." The count went to the door. "Tell Maria to make my coffee very strong this morning. I shall need a clear head. When Mr. Gerard comes, if everything is satisfactory, I shall open a bottle of Lacrima Christi—our best. At what time did you say he is coming, Diodotta?"

"Early, darling. He is very impatient. Surely by ten o'clock."

The count plodded down the staircase, still frowning. He would have preferred a son-in-law of his own race.

After breakfast his daughter went into the garden and sat on the bench, just where she had been sitting when Tony declared his love. The sunlight was as yellow as jonquils, the sky as blue as the blue seas of romance. She would wait for him here, Diodotta decided. Although it was still very early, she waited impatiently, wondering why he did not come.

For an hour, two hours, three, Diodotta sat watching the shadows of the cedars along the wall grow shorter and shorter, as the sun mounted higher and higher in the sky. The freshness of early morning gave way to unpleasant heat, and the bench on which she sat was exposed to the sun's

glare. How different from the evening before, with its lambent moonlight! Did Americans customarily sleep so late? Soon, she realized, it would be time for the mid-day meal.

Very wearily Diodotta rose and went to her father, who was sitting placidly in his library, poring over a volume of Dante. He glanced up, but did not speak. Already Maria was making a great clatter of dishes in the dining room. Then a motor roared in the street outside, followed by a knock at the door which made Diodotta's heart stand still. He had come!

Her heart stood still a second time, as she saw Pietro Raffo enter the room. Then it began to pound violently, between anger and grief.

Signor Raffo greeted her in his usual effusive manner, apparently unaware of the tears in her eyes. Then he went over to speak to her father, and Diodotta escaped to her room. Soon thereafter Maria began to set a third place at the table. Evidently Signor Raffo was to remain for luncheon.

It was when that meal was half over—and during it Diodotta had not spoken a word—that Raffo began to tell an amusing story.

He had heard at the club, he said, of a singular and very droll jest played by one of the members upon an American. The latter, it appeared, had scoffed at all superstitions, whereupon the member in question, noted as a practical joker, had introduced the young man to a certain lady of his acquaintance, explaining that she possessed the evil eye. To substantiate his statements he told the credulous foreigner that the lady's three former lovers had all suffered violent deaths because of her fatal charm.

The witty Italian than proceeded to make the young American's life miserable by all manner of practical jokes, so that he went about in constant fear of his life. He had been paying ardent attention to the lady with the supposed evil eye, but was hesitant to ask her to marry him, because of what had happened to her former sweethearts. Now, it was rumored, he had left Rome—had run away, rather than face the consequences of his wooing. The names of the persons concerned, Raffo explained, had not been revealed to him, but every one considered it a highly amusing adventure.

The count, too, was amused—more so

than he would have had he glanced at Diodotta. She sat rigid, waxen, with the blood drained from her cheeks, and her eyes, like two points of golden fire, fixed upon those of Pietro Raffo. The latter, refusing to meet her glance, reddened a little and twisted his mustaches.

"These mad Americans!" he remarked uneasily. "One can never tell what they will do."

Then Diodotta spoke.

"*Signore*," she said, "I think you can tell me the name of that American. Do me the favor to inform me of it."

Raffo would say no more.

"No names were given," he maintained stoutly, "in the story told me. After all, what does it matter?"

"If no names were given, how can you assert that the young American has left Rome?"

"I do not assert it of my own knowledge. I merely repeat to you what I have heard at my club. They said he had gone to Paris."

Diodotta was silent thereafter, but her face remained the color of wax. The meal over, she went to her room, while her father and Raffo smoked in the library. When she came down again, wearing a street dress, their guest had departed; but the count, who was still sitting in his library, called to her. She went to him, very calm, very lovely in her distress.

"My child," he said, very gently, because of his deep love for her, "I think we had best forget the young man who was expected here this morning, and turn our minds to more serious matters. Signor Raffo has just done us the honor to make a formal proposal of marriage. The settlements he proposes are most generous—magnificent, in fact. He tells me that he is about to make an extended tour in his yacht, to Spain, France, England. It is his wish that the wedding should take place immediately, in order that you may accompany him on his journey. He is a reliable and substantial man, who will make you an excellent husband, and I greatly desire that you should marry him. My consent is already given. It only remains for you to give yours."

Diodotta faced her father, her eyes desperate.

"As you have probably surmised," she said in a little, hard voice, "I feel sure that the American to whom Signor Raffo

referred is Mr. Gerard. I am going out now. If I find that he has left Rome, as we have been told, I will marry any one you wish; but I refuse to give my answer until I have made sure."

"Is it possible that you would run after any man?" The count's old eyes held limitless pride. "A daughter of our house—"

"Be sure I shall not forget my lineage," Diodotta said, her pride equaling his own; "but Pietro Raffo may have lied."

"Your American did not come," the count objected coldly.

"But why? They say he has left Rome—run away. I cannot accept mere rumors. I must know for myself."

She went out, deeply, tragically hurt. Two thoughts were uppermost in her mind—one, that Luigi Martoni was Tony's friend; the other, that the chevalier was the most incorrigible practical joker in Rome. Both of these facts led her to his office.

Signor Martoni was dictating when Diodotta arrived. As soon as he observed the expression on her face, he dismissed his secretary and closed his office door.

"What is the matter, my dear?" he inquired anxiously. "One might suppose that I had mortally offended you."

"It may be that you have," Diodotta told him calmly, betraying nothing of the rage within her. "Bitterly! Brutally! In a manner I shall never forgive!"

The chevalier reddened.

"You have heard about my thoughtless—my silly joke?"

"I have heard, *cavaliere*. I do not wish to talk about it. If I were a man, I should hurt you very badly! As it is—"

The chevalier grew even redder. He thrust out his hand.

"Truly I am sorry, *Diodotta mia*," he whispered. "I shall never forgive myself; but, after all, the affair is quite harmless. No one has been injured by it. I will go to Tony and confess everything, this very minute. Then you will perhaps forgive me."

Diodotta's heart sank. She had thought—hoped—that her Tony's disappearance might have been part of the chevalier's mad prank. Robbed of that hope, she sat, silent.

"I did not suppose—I did not know," Luigi stammered, seeing the anguish in her eyes. This, he realized, was serious. "Who told you?"

"Pietro Raffo. He gave no names, but I knew. He said that the American, afraid to declare his love, had run away. That is a lie—the first part, anyhow, for last night Tony told me that he loved me and asked me to marry him. This morning he was to speak to my father, but he did not come. We waited hour after hour, and you can understand my terrible humiliation. Raffo says he has run away, but I think that is a lie, too. Find out, Luigi! You owe me some reparation—"

"I—I owe you more than I can pay, I fear," the chevalier whispered, his face now pale where before it had been red. "Not for the world would I have brought this upon you. Indeed, I had no suspicion that matters between you and Tony were—serious; but do not alarm yourself. Of course he has not left Rome. Tony Gerard is not a man to run away from anything. I will telephone his hotel at once."

When, however, his short conversation over the wire was ended, he turned to Diodotta, his features suddenly lined, old.

"The hotel management say that he has given up his room, paid his bill, and ordered his luggage sent to the station!" The chevalier's voice was little more than a whisper. "He told them that he was leaving Rome unexpectedly. I cannot believe it!"

For a moment Diodotta's head sank to hide her tears. Even pride has its limits; but it was for a moment only. Straight as a rapier she rose from her chair.

"I thank you, *cavaliere*," she said, her chin in the air. "I have no further service to ask of you. *Addio!*"

She left the office so swiftly that the chevalier, in his confusion, did not even have time to open the door.

VII

TONY'S first morning of imprisonment in his wine cellar dungeon was one of dreadful gloom. He was awakened by the rattle of dishes, to find a man, whose face was hidden by the familiar handkerchief mask, placing on the table a wooden tray containing his breakfast. The room was dark; only the faintest suggestion of daylight came through the small, tunnel-like windows in the rear wall.

Having put down his tray, the man took out matches and lit a candle. Thoughts of attacking him—of braining him, with the coffeepot and making a dash for free-

dom—came into Tony's mind, only to be discarded as he heard the murmur of voices in the corridor. His captors were taking no chances.

When the man had gone, Tony plunged his head into a basin of water, made a sketchy toilette. Then, in rage and disgust, he choked down his breakfast.

Only one thought occupied his mind—Diodotta would be waiting for him, to speak to her father about their engagement, and he would fail to appear! She would be unable to understand that. Her father would be unable to understand it. Count d'Este was a man of pride. Such a humiliation, such an insult, to himself, to Diodotta, was a thing not to be forgiven.

Merely to think of all this left Tony shaking with anger. If Pietro Raffo was responsible for his kidnaping—at this point Tony's thoughts became actually murderous.

By this time sufficient light was coming through the tiny windows to render the candle unnecessary. He put it out, and dragged his chair to the rear wall. By standing on it, he was able to glimpse, through one of the tunnel-like openings, a patch of blue sky—nothing more. It was like looking through a periscope that could not be revolved. His prison, apparently, was at a considerable height, for it seemed to be above the tree tops.

He got down, and tried to read one of the books he found on the table—a passionate love story by Gabriele d'Annunzio. It made Tony think all the more of Diodotta. He hurled the book into a corner.

As the morning advanced, sounds floated up to him through the little windows—laughter, snatches of song, words too faint to be distinguished, footsteps, the splashing of water, the creaking of oars. Evidently the building in which he was confined faced a lake or a stream. There was a path, probably, along the bank at the base of the wall. There were people going to and fro. If only, in some way, he could send Diodotta a message to reassure her of his undying love! The thought so tortured him that he began to pace frantically about the room.

Something entangled his feet. He looked down and saw the strands of rope with which he had been bound the night before—fragments kicked beneath the table. Rope! Something might be done with that.

Collecting the pieces, he began to unravel them and tie them together in a long, crazily knotted cord. It was a help to have something with which to occupy his fingers, and he spent most of the forenoon at it, hiding his handiwork when the masked man brought in the midday meal.

A thought had been forming in his mind. If he could make a cord long enough to reach to the path below, or to the water, in case it lapped his prison wall, he might conceivably send some sort of message to Diodotta.

When he had finally used all the bits of rope at his command, he possessed a line some fifty feet in length, full of knots and splices, but fairly strong. Would it prove long enough to reach from his windows to the ground below? The only way to find out was to try it.

First weighting the end of the cord with his watch and chain, he stood upon the chair and proceeded to lower it through one of the little openings. Foot by foot he allowed the line to slip through his fingers. Finally, when all but a yard had been paid out, he felt the cord slacken, and knew that the watch had come to rest upon something solid—the path, perhaps, along the foot of the wall; or possibly the bottom of the stream. He would know, as soon as he had hauled it back.

The line came up, dry to the end, with bits of earth and mud, however, clinging to the watch and chain. That meant, no doubt, a path of some sort along the river bank, at the foot of the wall. If he could lower a note addressed to Diodotta, some passer-by, if suitably rewarded, might perhaps deliver it. An infinitesimal chance, of course, with Rome at least thirty or forty miles away, but his only one.

He began to consider the question of a letter. He might write it on the flyleaf of one of the books. He needed an envelope of some sort. Perhaps he could make one, and could seal it with wax from the candle. That should work.

It was while he sat considering these matters that the door of the cellar was pushed open, and to Tony's stupefaction two masked men came in, carrying a trunk, which they placed upon the floor. Then they went out, to return with additional luggage. It was all there, he saw at a glance—even his kit bag and his golf clubs.

When the two porters had disappeared, Tony saw that the stockily built man of

the night before remained, a paper in his hand.

"*Signore*," he said pleasantly, "I felt desolated by the knowledge of your lack of fresh clothing. Consequently I took the liberty of telephoning to your hotel, in your name, saying that you were called away unexpectedly, and requesting that your belongings should be packed and sent to the railway station. My men got them there, and your account was paid by a messenger. Here is the bill, properly receipted." He tossed the sheet of paper upon the table. "You owe me four thousand eight hundred and seventeen *lire*."

"Damn you!" Tony exclaimed, shaking with rage. "I gave no such orders!"

The man only laughed and went out.

For the first time that he could remember Tony Gerard wept, but his tears were tears of fury. His room at the hotel given up! His account paid! His luggage sent to the railway station! The hotel management informed that he was unexpectedly leaving Rome! What would Diodotta think now? What *could* she think? That he had run away, of course—had sneaked off without a word of farewell!

For a moment he thought seriously of murder. It would be easy to take a golf club and brain the next person who entered the room. Then reason returned. The possession of his trunks solved one problem, at least; for in one of them there was a writing case with letter paper, fountain pen, and even sealing wax.

He got the things out and wrote Diodotta a hasty note. Even the writing of it seemed to bring him closer to her, whether it was ever delivered or not. This is what it contained:

*Diodotta mia, I have been carried away to some place, I do not know where, among the hills. I am shut up in an old wine cellar, which seems to be built beside a stream. I am lowering this message through a little window by means of a cord, in the hope that some one may find and deliver it. The five hundred *lire* inclosed is to be given to the bearer as a reward.*

You know now why I could not come to you this morning, but be assured, my darling, that I love you devotedly, and when I get out of here some one shall suffer for this outrage. I pray to God that this letter will reach you, for my heart is breaking at the thought that you might doubt me. With a thousand thousand kisses I am always—your Tony.

This letter, placed in an envelope along with a note for five hundred *lire*, Tony sealed with three blobs of red wax and

carefully attached to the end of his line. To do this it was necessary to punch a hole through one corner and make use of a bit of raveled string. On the back of the envelope he printed in Italian:

Whoever delivers this letter to the Signorina d'Este, at the Palazzo d'Este in Rome, will receive a large reward.

Just before he went to bed he lowered the message from one of the windows. He did not expect any one to find it that night, but there was a chance of some wayfarer passing at dawn. To render the line more conspicuous, he tied three of his most brilliantly colored neckties to it, at intervals of two feet above the watch and chain.

When the slackness of the cord told him that the watch was resting securely on the ground, he tied its loose end to the handle of his kit bag, placed against the wall. His greatest fear was that the letter might be discovered by some one in the employ of his captors, some servant of the house in which he was confined. In that case, all his efforts would have been in vain.

Before he went to bed that night, he prayed. There was no doubt about it, being in love did astonishing things to a man!

VIII

WHEN Diodotta d'Este swept out of his office, the Chevalier Martoni closed his desk for the day and followed her. His expression, usually smiling, was grave and preoccupied. Unintentionally, he had done Diodotta a great injury; he meant to make reparation for it in whatever way he could.

Cursing himself for his stupid prank in the first place, and in the second for having told it to his friends at the club, he drove to young Gerard's hotel. What had happened he did not know, but it seemed incredible that Tony could have run away. Perhaps Mrs. Van Ness or Celeste might be able to tell him something. He had danced with Celeste until very late the night before. Her mother, not without reason, had ceased to think of Tony Gerard as a possible son-in-law and was beaming pleasantly upon the chevalier himself.

Celeste, as it happened, was in, having just finished a late luncheon. Martoni had planned to meet her for tea.

"I'm two hours early," he said, taking her hand in his; "but there's a question I must ask you. Have you seen anything of Tony Gerard?"

"Why, no—not since yesterday. Has anything happened to him?"

"I don't know. It is rumored that he has left Rome—very suddenly. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"Not a word. What makes you think he has gone?"

"The hotel people told me so when I called them up this morning. Please excuse me a moment while I speak to them again. I'm afraid there's something wrong."

He hurried away. When he came back, there was a glare in his eyes that Celeste thought alarming.

"Luigi dear," she said, placing her hand on his arm, "what is the matter?"

"Imbeciles!" he muttered. "Idiots! Some one telephones them this morning, saying that he is Mr. Gerard, that he is unexpectedly called away, that he wants his trunks packed and sent to the Stazione Termini. A messenger arrives with money to pay his bill, and they accept these orders without seeing Mr. Gerard, and without any certainty that the message really comes from him! Can you imagine such stupidity? The clerk says he recognized Mr. Gerard's voice. I say he is a fool and a liar! I don't believe Tony had anything to do with it at all."

"Then what do you believe?" Celeste asked.

"Amazing as it may seem," the chevalier replied, "in a civilized city like Rome, I believe that Tony has been kidnaped."

"But by whom, and why?"

"That is the question. It may be that Pietro Raffo can answer it. I, perhaps, am the greatest imbecile of the lot. I play a practical joke. I allow Tony to believe that the woman with whom he has fallen in love possesses the evil eye—that she had been loved by three men before him, all of whom came to some tragic end! Horrible! Of course, when I told him this, I had no idea that he and Diodotta would fall in love with each other. To make matters worse, I tell the story, mentioning no names, to some friends at my club, where Pietro Raffo, I do not doubt, heard it. A clever man! An unscrupulous man! What is the result? He turns my foolish joke to his advantage. He identifies Tony, and schemes to make him appear a coward before the woman he loves. She is humiliated beyond hope of forgiveness for

Tony; and meanwhile Raffo advances his own suit. What is to be done, I ask you?"

Celeste gazed at him with a faintly humorous smile.

"Luigi," she said, "I have known Tony Gerard all my life. Any one should realize that he is incapable of running away from anything. You had better go to Diodotta d'Este and tell her so. How could she doubt him, if she loves him? The thing is absurd!"

"You do not understand our Italian temperament," the chevalier began, but Celeste stopped him.

"Suppose, Luigi," she said softly, "I told you that I—that I loved you, and then I disappeared. Would you doubt me?"

She gazed tenderly up into his eyes. The chevalier was lost. Despite the presence of two elderly ladies and a child in the reception room, he kissed her.

"Never!" he whispered. "Never, if I thought you meant it. Do you?"

Had Mrs. Van Ness seen the little tableau, she would have been greatly pleased.

"Go to Diodotta," Celeste told him. "Convince her that Americans know how to love. Then I shall be convinced that Italians know how to love, as well. The idea of doubting a man—"

The chevalier wrung her hand.

"I'll do it," he said, and dashed to his car.

But when he saw Diodotta, the task did not seem so easy. She met him in the ancient and somewhat faded reception room, very cold, very formal, because of her injured pride.

"You come too late, Luigi," she said, without offering her hand. "I promised my father that if Mr. Gerard had left Rome, I would do as he wished. Mr. Gerard, it seems, has left Rome. My father wishes me to marry Pietro Raffo. My promise has been given, and I shall keep it. Americans, it seems, are not so particular."

The chevalier leaned forward and spoke in a quick whisper.

"There is something, is there not, in the motto of your house," he said, "which speaks of faith unbroken?"

Diodotta started, but made no reply.

"Should you break faith with the man you love?" the chevalier went on.

"Has he not broken faith with me?"

"Are you sure?"

"He has left Rome."

"But perhaps not willingly. In fact, I strongly suspect that he has been carried off against his wishes."

Diodotta's appearance underwent a quick change. The hurt pride in her eyes gave way to sudden hope. Her drooping shoulders stiffened.

"Oh, Luigi, Luigi!" she cried. "Do you really think so? Why?"

"I am not certain, of course; but this I do know—the orders to the hotel concerning Mr. Gerard's room and his luggage came by telephone. He did not appear in person. That is something."

Diodotta shook her head, disappointed. She was incurably romantic. Once more her shoulders drooped.

"It is good of you, chevalier, to try to cheer me," she said; "but you offer a very faint hope. Who could possibly be interested in keeping Mr. Gerard away from— from Rome?"

"Pietro Raffo!" replied Martoni, his voice suddenly sharp.

Diodotta started.

"Dio!" she whispered. "Do you really think—"

She broke off, as Maria came to the door of the room.

"There is a young man here," the woman said, "who has a letter for the signorina."

"Send him in," Luigi cried, all eagerness, before Diodotta could speak.

They waited, breathless, until a slender youth of sixteen came to the doorway and stood there, cap in hand.

"I have a letter for the Signorina Diodotta d'Este," he said.

"Oh!" Diodotta sprang toward the boy, ready to embrace him. "Give it to me! Quick!"

"There was a reward spoken of," the young man said, making no effort to produce the letter.

"Anything you ask — anything!" Diodotta cried, trembling with eagerness.

"Fifty lire, signorina?" the boy questioned, as if asking for the Bank of Italy. "I have come all the way from Carsioli."

"A hundred," Luigi said. "Give the signorina the letter!"

The young man drew a soiled envelope from his pocket and extended it to Diodotta. Her fingers shook as she tore it open, but when she had read the note inside she smiled.

"It is as you have said, chevalier," she whispered, handing him the sheet of paper. "He is held from coming to me, against his will. I am ashamed, deeply ashamed, to have doubted him!" Her lips quivered. "The five hundred *lige* is for the messenger."

She handed the bank note to the boy, who, overwhelmed by his good fortune, sought to leave the room; but the chevalier stopped him.

"Wait!" he commanded. "This letter gives me information as to its writer's whereabouts. How did you come by it?"

"I—I picked it up—by the roadside," the boy stammered.

He would say no more, in spite of the chevalier's repeated and indignant questions. Finally Martoni gave up in disgust.

"It is always the same," he growled angrily. "The boy is shielding some one else—some one who may possibly be employed about the place where Tony is confined, and hence would not dare appear in the matter, for fear of consequences." Again he turned to the embarrassed and somewhat sulky messenger. "So you found the letter by the roadside near Carsioli?" he asked.

"I said nothing about Carsioli," the boy muttered, paling.

"Do not lie! You told us you had come all the way from there!"

"The—the *signore* misunderstood me." The boy seemed greatly frightened. "Will the *signore* please allow me to go?"

"Certainly not! Since you refuse to tell us the truth, perhaps you will be more communicative to the police."

At that moment Count d'Este, accompanied by Pietro Raffo, came into the room. They had been sitting in the garden for the past hour, discussing the details of Diodotta's marriage. Now, everything finally agreed upon, the count had invited his prospective son-in-law into the house to seal the bargain in a glass of wine.

When he saw Diodotta, the chevalier, the frightened boy, he paused. Diodotta was the first to speak.

"I have just learned," she said softly, gazing not at her father, but at Raffo, "that Mr. Gerard, instead of leaving Rome voluntarily, was carried away against his will, and is now shut up in a cellar near Carsioli. This boy has brought me a letter—"

The count raised his slender hand.

"I am not interested in the affairs of Mr. Gerard, my dear," he said quietly. "Send the boy away. Signor Raffo and I have been discussing the marriage, which will take place a week from to-morrow. We are about to drink a glass of wine together in honor of the occasion. You and the *cavaliere* will, of course, join us."

The chevalier, however, had other plans, and voiced them.

"Although you may not be interested in Mr. Gerard's affairs, count," he said, "I, as his friend, necessarily am. In fact, I am extremely anxious to find out who is responsible for dragging him off to Carsioli, just when—"

"Why not yourself?" Raffo burst out, rasping anger in his voice. "I am told at the club that you have been persecuting the young man in a variety of ways for the past two weeks. If suspicion is to fall on any one, it should be on you!"

"What you say is true," Luigi snapped, his eyes bright with excitement; "but in this case I am not guilty. Before I drink to your engagement to the Signorina d'Este, I propose to find out who is!"

Raffo faced him, blustering.

"I wish you success, *cavaliere*," he said. Then he turned to the count. "With your permission, I will withdraw." He included Diodotta in his bow. "The occasion seems to be somewhat inauspicious. Tomorrow, perhaps—"

In spite of his host's protestations, he insisted upon taking his leave.

"Diodotta," Luigi whispered, as the count followed his visitor into the hall, "my car is outside. Put on your hat, and we will take the boy with us to Carsioli. It is possible that we may find this house with a wine cellar, built on the bank of a stream. At least we can try. I did not like the look in our friend Raffo's eyes. He was frightened when he heard about the letter, and he plans to do something to save his face. Throats have been slit for less. I suggest that you should go out through the garden, to avoid your father. He might try to prevent you from going. We will of course leave at once." He took the boy by the arm. "Come!" he said sternly, and went out into the hall.

IX

TONY GERARD was still waiting for darkness to come, in order to draw in his line.

He dared not attempt it by daylight, for fear lest his improvised flags might attract attention, and the cord that he had so laboriously made might be taken away from him.

In the absence of his watch, he judged it to be close to six o'clock. The man who brought his evening meal would arrive at any moment. After that, Tony decided, he would draw in the cord and find out if his letter to Diodotta had passed into other hands.

Suddenly he noticed that the bit of string over the window ledge seemed very loose. At once the truth came to him. Whether the letter was gone or not, some one had taken his bait.

He sprang to the wall. A tug on the line told him that there was no longer any weight at its lower end. Unable to endure the suspense, he hauled in the cord, hand over hand. Everything had been taken—his watch, the letter, and the three gay neckties. He prayed that they had fallen into honest hands.

For the first time since his imprisonment he enjoyed the food that was presently placed before him. About half an hour after the dishes had been removed, and the darkness outside had made it necessary for him to light his candle, footsteps and voices sounded in the corridor outside. His letter to Diodotta had been intercepted, he thought at once. Possibly his captors had decided to drag him away to some other and more remote prison, or convey him out of Italy altogether. He would resist that, at all costs. Snatching an iron from his golf bag, he stood behind the table, waiting.

The door swung open, and two men came in, wearing the usual handkerchief masks. Swiftly, silently, they advanced toward Tony, one along either side of the table. The ropes in their hands told plainly enough what they meant to do. He was to be bound and taken away.

A third man stood in the doorway, with a candle in his hand. It was the heavily built individual who had greeted Tony the night before.

"Out with him, quick!" he commanded in an agitated voice.

The men came on, but, seeing the golf club in Tony's hands, they hesitated and stopped a pace or two away. What new weapon was this, with which the American so calmly awaited their attack?

An instant later they knew—so far as its effects were concerned, at least. With a swift slash to the left Tony cracked one man's extended wrist. The other, as he closed in, received the iron head of the club upon his skull with sufficient force to put him *hors de combat*.

Then Tony tossed his weapon aside and leaped to the top of the long table. In two strides he was at its farther end, and with arms outstretched he hurled himself upon the man in the doorway. It was a superb tackle, made in a manner which had earned for Tony, during his college days, the sobriquet "Get-'em Gerard." His opponent, unprepared for such tactics, reeled backward and fell, with a grunt of dismay, Tony on top of him. The candle was extinguished in the struggle, leaving the corridor in almost complete darkness.

To his right, however, Tony saw a square of starlit sky. He ran toward it and stumbled up a short flight of stone steps. Before him lay a flagged courtyard, with two automobiles standing upon it. A man walked up and down beside them, smoking a cigarette—a stoutish man with bristling mustaches and an aggressive tilt to his chin. With a shout of joy Tony recognized him. It was Signor Pietro Raffo.

The latter was by no means so prompt in his recognition of Tony, for that young man was probably the very last person he expected to see coming toward him from the cellar. In his astonishment, Raffo almost swallowed his cigarette. Then his hand sought his coat pocket, in which lay an automatic pistol.

His movements, however, were not quick enough, for Tony was upon him before his fingers had closed about the pistol's grip—upon him with an outthrust right arm which toppled him over like an obese ninepin.

"The fatal curse may be working," Mr. Gerard muttered, as he looked about for means of escape, "but it hasn't got me yet!"

One of the two cars beside him was a limousine, intended, no doubt, for his transportation to whatever remote destination his captors had in mind. The other was an open machine of powerful and handsome model. With a quick leap Tony was at the wheel.

"*A rivederci!*" he called back, waving his hand to the little group of men running to Signor Raffo's assistance.

A moment later he was swaying between the stone gateposts at the courtyard's entrance. The main road stretched before him, leading, he hoped, toward Rome. To get there as soon as possible was his one thought—to see Diodotta, explain his absence, and assure her of his love. No doubt Raffo, in the other car, would be in close pursuit.

The road was narrow, and not over smooth, but Tony drove at a breath-taking pace, paying no attention to the shouts of the few pedestrians he passed. Presently the straggling houses of a small town caused him to check his speed, but he resumed it as soon as he had regained the open road.

Had Diodotta received his letter, he wondered? If not, would she believe that he had run away? Or, more tragic still, would she think that he had come, like her other suitors, to some dreadful end?

He was not superstitious, he assured himself. He positively refused to be superstitious; yet there was no denying the fact that since he had met Diodotta d'Este some very strange things had happened to him. They must be married at once, he decided, in order to break the spell. Then he found himself laughing at the notion that there could really be any spell to break.

Suddenly the laughter died in his throat and his fingers closed convulsively upon the steering wheel. He was rounding a curve at high speed. Out of the gloom ahead shot the lights of another car, almost upon him. Cursing himself for his inattention, he tugged fiercely at the wheel.

He had been driving in the middle of the road. On one side of him rose a steep, wooded bank; on the other descended an even steeper slope. He glanced ahead, and in the glare of the headlights saw, to his utter amazement, the white and tragic face of Diodotta d'Este. He pressed desperately on the brake—too late. There followed a splintering crash, and at once millions of brilliant stars came wriggling through his brain like so many snakes.

X

If the Chevalier Martoni's car had not been guilty of a flat tire, he would have been farther ahead on his drive to Carsioli. Diodotta kept urging him to greater speed.

"For all we know," she said, "this monster Raffo may even now be doing my

Tony some terrible injury. We must hurry!"

The chevalier was an experienced and not a reckless driver. Spurred on, however, by Diodotta's fears, he tried to make up for the time lost in changing the tire. They had a definite destination now, for Diodotta, by using her blandishments upon the boy who had delivered the letter, had finally brought him to confession.

The document, he said, had been given him by a man whose name he feared to tell. This man worked on a farm near Carsioli. He had found the letter at the end of a string, hanging from a window. There had also been a watch and chain, which the finder had kept, and he was to get half of any reward that might be given. If he knew that the boy had told anything, he would certainly kill him; but he, the boy, would secretly guide the *signorina* and her companion to the farmhouse, if it was understood that nobody would be told of his treachery.

It was due, no doubt, to the fact that Luigi was listening to this conversation as he rounded the curve that he failed to hear the roar of the approaching automobile. He, like Tony, did what he could to lessen the shock of the inevitable collision. So far as the chevalier's car was concerned, it merely fell against the adjoining bank, stripped of its mud guards on one side. Tony, in Signor Raffo's costly machine, rolled dizzily over the edge of the slope.

Diodotta, at the moment of impact, screamed, but it was not a scream of terror—at least, not of terror for herself. In the glare of headlights she had seen Tony's face—had recognized him, as he had recognized her. The chevalier had done the same.

Agonized, trembling, they got out and ran back to the point at which the other car had left the road. Tony's machine lay on its side against the trunks of two trees, some twelve feet or more down the embankment. The fact that no sound came from it was ominous.

The chevalier went down the slope, with Diodotta clutching at his hand. Neither could speak. Luigi Martoni's conscience smote him dreadful blows. The mythical fate he had assigned to Diodotta's three equally mythical sweethearts had apparently descended upon his friend Tony Gerard; and he was the cause of it! His folly had brought it all about! So far as

the evil eye was concerned, he began to wonder if he might not possess it himself.

It was lucky that Pietro Raffo's car was an open one. It was equally lucky that the slope below the road held many low bushes. Into one of them Tony had been projected head first, with no more serious damage than a few scratches and a temporary loss of breath. At the moment he lay staring serenely up at the stars.

"Oh!" Diodotta cried, as they discovered him.

Then she took his head upon her breast and covered it with kisses. The chevalier began searching for broken bones, but found none. Tony smiled whimsically.

"Hello!" he said. "Don't worry! I'm all right; but the fatal curse almost got me that time, didn't it? I thought I was gone, Diodotta darling, like—like all the rest!"

Diodotta gave him a rapturous look, through tears.

"Are you referring to my former sweethearts, Tonio darling?" she whispered, an amazing light in her eyes.

"Why, yes, of course! Luigi Martoni told me about them. I promised I'd never mention the matter; but while I'm not su-

perstitious, you understand, I still think that after what has happened we'd better get married at once, Diodotta. Then, if the church doesn't fall on me or something—"

Diodotta stopped him with another kiss.

"Luigi is a terrible joker, my own!" she whispered. "You are the first and only sweetheart I've ever had in my life. He told you that story about me to scare you, because you said you weren't superstitious."

"What?" Tony's weakness vanished. He struggled belligerently to his feet. "The infernal scoundrel! I—I'll break his neck for that!"

In his excitement he tripped over a root and would have plunged headlong down the hill if the chevalier had not caught him.

"Tony!" Luigi Martoni swept his friend into a true Italian embrace and kissed his cheek. "I am a liar! A fool! An idiot! Anything you please! I apologize! I admit that you are not superstitious! I kneel at your feet! But, just the same, I agree with you that you had better marry Diodotta as soon as possible! If anything more happens to you, I shall begin to believe in the evil eye myself!"

THE

END

OLD WITCH

Be still, old crone!
You caw more true
Than any crow
That ever flew.

You use your herbs
To poison some.
Your cat is blind,
Your parrot dumb.

You curse the lights
Of all the young,
But I know where
Your broom is hung.

Was it for this
You ate my salt?
Forecast my lot
Without a halt?

"The Bay of Guinea,
And Shantung silk?
An ibis quill,
And camel's milk?"

Forgive me, hag,
If I was cruel;
Come to my board
And share my gruel.

Sonia Ruthèle Novák